

EMPIRE WITHOUT END:
IMPERIAL HISTORY PRINTED, STAGED, AND SCREENED
IN MODERN CHINA, 1900-PRESENT

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This study deals with the ways that writers and producers in the modern period have represented the pre-modern imperial past. It sets out to pose the question: what role has a historical way of thinking inherited from the pre-modern empire played in China's continuous quest for modernity? In describing *what* in imperial history has been represented and *how* that has been represented during the modern period, this study attempts to explain *why* it was represented this way. It endeavors to theorize the historical continuity between traditional empire and modern nation-state, and address the tension between them.

During the long journey of China toward modernity, historical representations have played an essential role in redefining China's self-identity and imagining its place in the world. Throughout the modern period, despite different nominal characterizations about China's social reality, be it a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society, a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist socialist state, or a market-economy-post-socialist country, there is a deeply rooted historical way of thinking that persisted throughout the modern era and determined the way modern China developed itself conceptually. This historical way of thinking constitutes an "imperial-time regime," which deems unification as normal and takes the morality of each polity as the ultimate standard to judge its position in history.

Such an imperial-time regime, the normalization of unification and moralization of time, encompasses discursive changes in the modern era. It is manifested in various historical representations, suggesting that China persistently resists being put into the category of modern nation state.

Weaving textual and contextual analysis with critical theories, this study participates in the ongoing debate on China's past, present, and future within China and the worldwide discussion on redefining empire.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kun Qian received a B.A. in Economics from Peking University in 1996. She worked at a national bank in Beijing as a financial analyst before moving to the US in 2001 to continue her graduate education at Cornell University. She earned an M.S. in Applied Economics and Management in 2003 and an M.A. in Asian Studies in 2004. She then entered the Ph.D program in East Asian Literature at Cornell University, completing and defending her doctoral dissertation in the summer of 2009. She is joining the faculty of the University of Richmond in the fall of 2009.

To the memory of my father, Qian Zongjiu (1938-2009)

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INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the twenty-first century, narratives and images of past Chinese empires nearly dominated cultural production, coinciding with the intensification of the market economy and worldwide globalization. Intellectuals within China have debated whether this has been a collective psychological reaction against Western economic/ideological dominance to fulfill national pride as manifested in historical glory, or unconscious pursuit of a stable, secure past as a transcendent force of unity against the rapidly changing present to relieve an anxiety of emptiness, or, instead, is a more enduring issue, an ingrained belief in an underlying historical force that transcends this transient historical moment and manifests its enduring power. Although a mix of all three explanations may be at work, this dissertation is devoted to the third and broadest thesis.

Literary representations of the Chinese Empire throughout the twentieth century have been imagining time and space of the imperial past to identify China in the momentary flux and uncertain future of the newly discovered world order. These representations, variously manifested in novels, short stories, stage plays, films and television dramas, offer a virtual focus to look at modern Chinese history through their presentations of the imperial past.

The two discourses that have dominated twentieth-century China since the Chinese door was forced open to the Western (including Japanese) imperialist aggression are the discourse of modernity and the discourse of the modern nation state. For both of them imperial history has played the role of the “Other” in tension with the Western “Other.” Whereas the desire for modernity requires representing the imperial past as backward and suffocating, the nationalistic sentiment evokes the pride in antiquity and morality of the past Chinese Empire. Such a contradiction in

representing the past, therefore, not only manifests the selectivity of contemporary ideological needs, but also reflects the function of the past as a crucial factor in constructing the present, which has been largely overlooked or understated by modern scholars.

In studying Chinese history, scholars have made efforts to deconstruct the modern-premodern dichotomy, but the myth persists that the West has played an overwhelmingly dominant role leading to China's hybrid modernity. They suggest either a "Western impact-China response" model or an "internal demand-external solution" model.

By contrast, a "China-centered" approach would bring the imperial past to the fore, suggesting that modern China and the past Chinese Empire have been contingent upon each other, reinventing each other. Moreover, instead of being a passive "Other" to be represented, the past offers a deeply-rooted way of thinking that has shaped the modern mentality in constructing the present.

Through textual analysis, this dissertation shows that, despite the various *symptomatic* manifestations of imperial history in different periods, there is a *paradigmatic* tendency that pervades the entire modern era. It is a transcendent moral order that deems unification as normal and takes the morality of a regime as the foremost standard to judge its historical significance.

This normalization of unification and moralization of time constitute an "imperial-time regime," a theoretical term to describe the heritage of a traditional Chinese way of thinking about China. As a moral order, this regime is independent of, and transcendent over, specific political and material conditions, which continually reveal its unifying, perpetuating function in Chinese history. It is from its beginnings, no later than the Warring States era, bound up with the vision of empire, of time, and of moral agency, and is resilient enough to produce its own sub-regime to outlive any

specific historical periods, including the modern era. In this theoretical framework, Marxism was reconceived in China, not to displace Confucianism, but as a *substitution* for Confucianism. With Marxist internationalism substituting for the Chinese *datong* (grand unity) and the discourse of “the People” substituting for the discourse of “minxin-tianxia” (Whoever gains the people’s hearts will govern all under Heaven), China has persistently challenged the notion of the nation-state and resisted being confined within the boundary of a modern nation-state. Through modern representations of the Chinese Empire, the tension between empire and modern nation state is continually revealed.

Chapters One and Two establish the argument for such an imperial-time regime in terms of historiography and philosophy, Chinese and Western, and for its pervasiveness throughout the modern period, bringing seemingly divergent intellectual stances into convergence. The succeeding chapters then move to the close textual analysis of historical representations in literature and the media. Chapter Three surveys literary representations during the tremendous social changes between 1900 and 1980, and brings to the fore the tension between empire and modern nation state, from the works of Wu Jianren, Lu Xun, Guo Moruo and others, to Yan Haiping’s play on Li Shimin in the early 1980s, when the discourse of revolution was fading and the discourse of “Tianxia” (All under Heaven) reemerged. For the post-revolutionary period, in which the positive portrayals of past emperors participated in positioning China in the new global order, Chapters Four to Six explore several media, from the historical novels of Ling Li and Eryuehe, to films by Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Zhou Xiaowen, and television series produced by CCTV (China Central TV). Finally, Chapter Seven expands the study to literature on imperial history from a minority perspective, suggesting that “becoming minority” is a necessary and beneficial strategy in building the image of empire.

In sum, drawing on intellectual history, critical theories, and multiple artifacts from the late Qing period to the contemporary era, this study advances an interdisciplinary, cross-media analysis on the rarely researched area of historical representations. It not only proposes an intellectual inquiry into China's identity, but also engages with the worldwide discussion on redefining empire. In Western scholarship, the shift in emphasis from the military-political domain to the economic-cultural realm, or, from territorial power to non-territorial power in defining empire suggests that a different past is now emerging. What is usually placed under the rubric of the traditional has taken on a different valence: not simply the old cultural-imperial continuity but a sort of regional-global connectivity. In this sense, this study offers a fresh perspective not only to understand China in the process of continuous modernization, but also to look at the contemporary world order at large.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

The Imperial-Time Regime: the Eternal Return of the Chinese Empire

Tianxia (the empire, all under Heaven) is not one that belongs to one person, but one that belongs to all under Heaven, and only he who shares the benefit with all under Heaven can govern it.

----- Jiang Taigong (1211-1072BCE)

Perhaps the warlords of the early Republican period were only recent versions of the end-of Han or end-of Tang warlords. Perhaps the Nanjing government of Chiang Kai-shek was the Qin or Sui type of unifying, ephemeral dynasty which paves the way for a longer-lived bureaucratic centralized regime. Maybe China is forever China, as the saying is, absorbing everyone, and nothing has been new in a crowded century except ephemeral detail, spilling over a changeless paradigm of Chinese history.

-----Joseph Levenson

In a map labeled *Outline of Ancient Chinese History*,¹ the lengthy Chinese history is delineated as a timeline twisted into the shape of a spiral. Peter Hessler vividly described it this way:

Everything started in the center, at a tiny point identified as ‘Yuanmou Ape-man.’ After Yuanmou Ape-man (approximately 1.7 million years ago), the timeline passed through Peking Man and then made an abrupt turn. By the Xia dynasty, the spiral had completed one full circle. The Shang and the Zhou dynasties wrapped up a second revolution. The spiral got bigger with each turn, as if picking up speed. Whenever something ended—a dynasty, a warring state—the spiral was marked with a line and a black X, and then something new took its place. There weren’t any branches or dead ends. From Yuanmou Ape-man, it took three turns of the spiral to reach the revolution of 1911, where the timeline finally broke the cycle, straightened out, and pointed directly up and off the page.²

The breadth of the spiral signifies the spatial dimension of the Chinese empire, and the division of the transected block consequently indicates the partition of the

¹ Drawn by Lu Jixiang, (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 1997).

² Peter Hessler, *Oracle Bones: A Journey between China’s Past and Present* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), 13.

territory in the time period. Thousands of years, compressed into one current, spiral up, like a river flowing ahead, implying a continuous history of China as an organic whole, inclusive, unified, swirling around the center. There are no outsiders. The cyclical disunion-unification shift not only does not break through the bigger spiral, but rather reinforces the all-encompassing cyclical structure and the wholeness of the space. It seems not until the revolution of the republic when the last emperor was forced off throne is the space opened, turning outside, while the timeline is cut and broken. This is nothing other than the well-established myth of Chinese history: long, continuous imperial history in a self-centered, isolated space and the discontinuous transition from the traditional empire to the modern nation state.

While the Chinese continually highlight the myth till this day, scholars in the West nonetheless have made a lot of effort to deconstruct both parts of the myth: to discover an open empire instead of a closed one for ancient history, and to re-bridge the historical continuity in the modern period.³ This is what Paul Cohen called the “irony of ironies”: whereas the “outsiders” tried to adopt a China-centered perspective, turning from culture to history to approach the economic, geographic, spatially-delimited historical truth as against the intellectual generalization, the Chinese “insiders” insisted on the unity of the traditional culture and the impact of the Western factors in the modern period.⁴ The interaction and negotiation of the ironies manifest that, instead of invalidating the myth, the Western scholarly efforts nonetheless in both ways buttress the myth in that they are only significant when examined against the

³ Scholars have done a great deal of research trying to deconstruct the notion of the closed nature of Chinese empire. For example, Valerie Hansen’s *The Open Empire: A History of China to 1600* (New York & London: W.W.Norton & Company, 2000). For the continuity of modern history, scholars mostly focus on the intellectual heritage from tradition, as manifested among the intellectuals in the late Qing transitional period or the May Fourth period. Yet, despite blurring the boundary between modern and premodern, and the disagreement on the specific time demarking the modern and premodern, the mainstream understanding still holds the assumption that there is a fundamental change in terms of political, economic, and social relations.

⁴ Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, reprinted with new preface in 1996), 195.

Chinese generalizations (and the Western constructions in the earlier period) and thus merely add more layers to the well-established constructions. To say it is an open empire is to acknowledge the constant interactions between Chinese and non-Chinese peoples, to bring to the fore the heterogeneity of Chinese civilization as against the vision of a homogeneous one, and to underpin the absorbing and assimilative capacity of the Chinese civilization that could digest anything “foreign” into its own cultural system. Yet it does not answer the question what constituted the mythic “China,” a term that is constantly strengthened to signify an otherwise diverse culture, an entity that even seen as an artificial construct has survived thousands of years, and continually been perpetuated in the modern period. What makes the myth persistent for such a long history?

On the other hand, the continuity/discontinuity debate mostly focuses on the regionally-based social change within China before the Western onslaught. This focus seeks to minimize Western impact, and thus to evade the question of intellectual generalization about “China” at a national level.⁵ To investigate intellectual issues, research has mostly been done on the late imperial-early Republican period to delineate a traditional intellectual heritage, which stresses the positive function of a traditional mode of thinking in facilitating, energizing, and legitimating modernization. Hao Chang, for example, in his book on Liang Qichao, asserted that “it is mainly in terms of a particular set of concerns and problems inherited from Confucian tradition that Chinese intellectuals responded to the Western impact in the late Qing.”⁶ He thus reversed the “impact-response” model, turning it into one of “internal demand-external solution.” Thomas Metzger went a step further in his study on Neo-Confucianism,

⁵ Paul Cohen, *Discovering History in China*. Cohen pointed out that the spatially delimited studies raise the question of representativeness or typicality. “Finding a single county (out of some 1500) that fails to support these generalizations, therefore, does not in itself disprove the generalizations. All it shows is that the generalizations are not universally valid.” 169.

⁶ Hao Chang, *Liang Ch’i-ch’ao and Intellectual Transition in China*, 3.

arguing that Neo-Confucianism in late imperial China, instead of being a backward philosophy responsible for China's stagnancy, as the May Fourth iconoclasts charged, was in effect a transformative ideology, viewed in a certain way.⁷ Metzger observed that the Neo-Confucian intellectuals, regardless of their differences in philosophical and political approaches, shared a common cultural orientation, that they experienced an inevitable psychological, social predicament in trying to transform the self and the society. The Western impact, modernization or even revolution, rather than being the destruction of the traditional culture, offered an escape from this predicament. Modern Chinese intellectuals, whether liberals or communists, still held a shared cultural orientation and for the first time optimistically viewed Western thinking as a solution to achieve both the inner moral self-fulfillment and outer social transformation in terms of wealth and power. "It is the explosive mixture of this long-frustrated desire and the new possibilities of thought and action brought by the West which has fueled China's transformation."⁸ As much as I agree with Metzger on his observation on the "shared cultural orientation," his assertion of the intellectual "predicament" is not firmly grounded, as Paul Cohen rightly pointed out, and his idea of the West as China's redeemer still manifests a mindset based on the imperative of Western primacy.⁹ The problem with Metzger's study, as well as Chang's and many others', is that they take China's interaction with the West as the endpoint of Chinese history, casting the West in an overwhelming role yet trying to rebuild an indigenous continuity retrospectively. As a result, their researches seem to succeed more in reinforcing the modern-premodern, China-West divide delivered by Joseph Levenson in 1960s than in establishing the real connection or compatibility between traditional

⁷ Thomas A. Metzger, *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 202.

⁸ Metzger, *Escape from Predicament*, 232.

⁹ Paul Cohen, *Discovering History in China*, 91.

Chinese thinking and modern Western thinking. In other words, these researches mostly accentuate the incompatibility of Chinese and Western thought and thereby essentialize both China and the West to create a hybrid Chinese modern as against the original modernity of the West.

The unexamined assumption that the modern Chinese nation—overly determined by the encounter with the West—is both the start and the end of modern Chinese history, was most explicitly addressed by Prasenjit Duara. Duara observed that the discourse of the nation built upon the ideal of Western enlightenment and the conception of a linear, progressive History (Duara used a capital ‘H’ to identify this particular conception of history) manifests a fundamental dilemma. The nation as the subject of History cannot bridge the aporia in the experience of linear time because of “the disjuncture between past and present as well as the non-meeting between time as flux and time as eternal.” Therefore, “the nation actually both lives in History and also at the end of it.”¹⁰ What this implies in the Chinese case is that the encounter with the West, the adoption of linear, progressive History, and the awakening of modern self-consciousness, marks the end, or the closure, of History in China, for the dominant discourse represses the alternative discourses in the process of modernization and nation building. Duara’s study, both theoretically and empirically, demonstrates the process of this normative repression and recovers the alternative, repressed discourses of the nation. As much as I was inspired and convinced by his argument, I would like to go a step further in order to pose the question of what accounts for the triumph of one discourse over the alternatives (e.g. centralized state over federalism), other than the overwhelming impact of the West and the discursive negotiation with the West.

¹⁰ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 29.

In this study I don't intend to answer the massive question "what constituted the myth of the Chinese Empire," though my research might be able to come to terms with it. Neither am I going to create a persuasive thesis to deconstruct the China-West, modern-premodern dichotomy since there is no way to essentialize any of them. Yet I hope to propose a model in which history, or historical thinking, develops in a multilinear and compatible way. At the discursive intersection of cultures, the dominant force of history (as in the Chinese case) will manifest its established pattern by adopting the appealing discourse that is completely compatible with its pattern. It is not only that the Self (China) manipulates and appropriates the Other (West) to serve its own ends, but also that the (manipulated) Other already exists in the Self echoing the certain principle of its historical origin. History is always in transit and the end is out of reach. A "China-centered perspective," as Cohen proposed it,¹¹ would take the shared cultural orientation as the paradigmatic, driving force in guiding the symptomatic social changes into an established pattern. It is not only that the dominant, official discourse of modernity and nation (e.g. Marxism) suppressed the alternative narratives of reality, but also that the dominant discourse itself was an expression of this pre-existing paradigmatic force. I suggest that in modern Chinese history, such overpowering historical thinking dominates the discursive social forces and determines the way modern China has developed itself conceptually. The normalization of unification and moralization of time, which I will term the "imperial-time regime," not only structures the cyclical pattern of ancient Chinese history, but also enfolds Marxist historical thinking and continually manifests its transcendent and pervasive power in the modern period.

¹¹ Paul Cohen, *Discovering History in China*, 149.

The material-spiritual interplay in modern Chinese history

Although the aforementioned map separates the modern from premodern at the year 1912 in terms of the change in political regime, the tension between the traditional empire and the modern nation state could be traced back to the late Qing period when China's universal, self-centered worldview was challenged and smashed by Western imperialism (including Japan). Theoretically, the historical discontinuity resulted from the abrupt intrusion of the West, with its military, material power and democratic, scientific spirit, which forced China to recognize the global space and yield the belief in "China as the world" to "China as a nation."¹²

Regardless of the continual attempt of the Chinese scholars in the traditionalist group trying to reinterpret or reinvent Confucian doctrines to compete with Western ideas, and despite the radical iconoclasts' intrinsic suspicion and doubt about westernization that led to the incomplete and bankrupt enlightenment,¹³ the most influential opinion holds that the discursive development of modern Chinese history demonstrated that Western thought as a whole defeated Chinese thought, albeit in a selective and modified fashion, and the Western universal (such as Marxism) displaced the Chinese universal (Confucianism), which underlined the transition from a traditional empire to a modern nation state. As Joseph Levenson pointed out in the 1960s, intellectual exchange between cultures will generate the expansion of language in both cultures, yet how far the new language will "travel" depends on the power

¹² Scholars have demonstrated that the discovery of a global space shapes the Chinese nationalistic conception of China. For instance, Xiaobing Tang asserts that Liang Qichao's idea of Chinese history was established on the basis of the idea of a global space, which allowed him eventually to perceive modernity in a new global imaginary of difference. Refer to Xiaobing Tang, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). Similarly, Edward Wang states that modern Chinese historiography was established against a transnational sensitivity. See Edward Wang, *Inventing China Through History: The May Fourth Approach to Historiography* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001).

¹³ For instance, in the Late Qing period, Kang Youwei radically reinterpreted Confucian thought to fit into the progressive world trend. In later periods, historians such as Gu Jiegang, Chen Yinke, were also trying to blend Confucian thinking with modern Western thought. See Hao Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*, and Edward Wang, *Inventing China through History*.

comparison between two societies. It is the military, political, and economic superiority of the West that determined that Western thought *displaced* Chinese thought. In his words,

The effect of ideas in diffusion, the degree of their disarrangement of their fresh intellectual environment, depends, it seems, not on their disembodied character as abstract ideas but on how much of their mother societies they drag with them to the alien land. As long as one society is not being conclusively shaken up by another, foreign ideas may be exploited, as additional vocabulary, in a domestic intellectual situation. But when foreign-impelled social subversion is fairly underway (and that has been so in China, not in the West, and in China only in the nineteenth century and after), then foreign ideas begin to displace domestic.¹⁴

It is fairly convincing to interpret intellectual exchange by means of power confrontation. Yet the “displacement model” cannot fully explain the uneasy acceptance of Western ideas (including the inventive exploitation of Western ideas) and the continual “return” of tradition in metamorphosis. The material-symbolic dynamic cannot completely fulfill the psychological need: the strong nationalistic sentiment that resisted the shift yielding recognition of China as *the* world to seeing it as a nation. On the one hand, nationalism demanded a glorious past as the basis of a shared community, thus it was epistemologically impossible to discard tradition totally and embrace foreign ideas; on the other hand, the rootlessness of the Western model inevitably encountered psychological resistance, especially in a country like China for which identity largely depended on its civilizational heritage.

Levenson’s assertion, to be sure, has been the target of criticism for decades. As I have demonstrated above, Hao Chang and Metzger have reversed Levenson’s “impact-response” model, turning it into one of “internal demand-external solution” and attempted to bridge the continuity of Chinese intellectual tradition. Yet they also

¹⁴ Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1966), 158-9.

assigned the West an overwhelming role to rescue Chinese society, so that they failed actually to undermine the weight of Levenson's "displacement" model.

Just in this regard, I suggest using the term "substitution" instead of "displacement." Borrowing from psychoanalytic theory, "substitution" signifies an inseparable relation to the origin. Insofar as "substitution" manifests shifting actions so as to at once reveal and conceal the root-seeking or root-questioning endeavor, it serves better than "displacement" to describe the discursive development of modern Chinese history. In this light, the mainstream Marxist discourse may not "displace" the traditional Chinese thinking once and for all, but merely appears as a conceptual "substitution" which is parallel and compatible with tradition. The difference between the substitutions, then, embodies in itself the theoretical residue that registers in time, a historical unconscious that determines the construction of the substitute and overall, links to its origin—the ancient Chinese Empire. In fact, as will be shown below, it is a traditional way of thinking that determines the triumph of Marxism in China.

Indeed, from the late Qing on, the intellectuals' pursuit of a national cure never detached itself from their strong nationalistic sentiment and by extension, their Chinese origin. Their diversified attitudes toward tradition were nothing other than the multifaceted "expressions" of the ever strengthened linkage to the motherland. The labels of "traditionalist," "iconoclasts," or "liberals" cannot do justice to any of them. The traditionalists were triggered by Western scientific knowledge and trying to reinvent tradition, the iconoclasts could not escape from their emotional tie to tradition to call for nationalism, and the liberals were not wholesale modernists intent on totally abandoning tradition.¹⁵ Hence, the seemingly rational choice made by any of them

¹⁵ Edward Wang, *Inventing China through History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 3.

unavoidably cast an unconscious shadow that responded to the eternal call of the Chinese origin.

Here, it seems necessary to distinguish “thought” from “thinking.”¹⁶ While thought could be petrified into a relic of the past which only bears historical significance, such as Confucianism, thinking could to some extent detach itself from thought and live in the present. While thought could be despised as the laggard in ruin, thinking nonetheless would be disguised as the historical unconscious to set the wheel of history in motion. It is the traditional way of thinking that consciously or unconsciously connected the Chinese intellectuals to tradition and determined their way to find “substitutions” for the tradition. This traditional way of thinking, which I will term the “imperial-time regime,” deems unity and morality as normal to construct a transcendent symbolic order that structures the political imperial order. In other words, the symbolic encompasses the material. While the political imperial order has been challenged and disdained, this transcendent moral order, detached from Confucianism, nonetheless has still organized the intellectual thinking in the modern period. In this sense, the continually updated intellectual quests for a national therapy were no more than the different prescriptions to respond to the moral call of the traditional symbolic order.

Indeed, even though the intellectuals set out with the desire to search for power and wealth, the material-spiritual interplay was nevertheless continually directed toward the symbolic, ethical side. The highly mentalistic tendency inherited from traditional thinking prompted them to consider the primacy of spiritual, ideological power over material development, which was from the beginning against the Western scientific spirit, especially Marxism. From the debate on *ti* (substance) / *yong* (function) (Chinese learning as substance, and Western learning as function), to the debate on

¹⁶ Joseph Levenson made the distinction in his posthumous book *Revolution and Cosmopolitanism*.

kexue yu renshengguan (the relationship between science and the outlook on life), to the wholehearted embrace of Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science, till the acceptance of Marxism, the gradual shift in emphasis from Chinese thought to Western ideologies manifested the unsettled desire to find a substitute for Chinese learning that might serve as a moral and unifying equivalent, and would transcend the specific political regime or national boundary. The transplantation of Marxism, in this sense, was the successful answer to that moral call ingrained within tradition.

Levenson observed that Marxism appealed to Chinese intellectuals in that it synthesized the iconoclastic and traditionalistic debate and addressed the psychological need of both “anti-feudalism” and “anti-imperialism.”¹⁷ By positioning tradition into history with only historical significance, “Communism,” Levenson wrote, “permits iconoclasm while sheltering an impulse to restore a tie with the past.”¹⁸ While this analysis is valuable in that it in a way rationalizes the choice of Communism in modern China, the antithetic division between China and the West nonetheless undermines the psychological dimension originating in tradition. Such a psychological dimension was made more explicit by Metzger. Metzger stated that Marxism, or Western thought in general, offered the frustrated Chinese intellectuals unprecedented optimism to escape from the moral predicament within China. Although he still cast the West in the redeemer’s role, he was careful to give credit to the indigenous heritage of moral ideas that facilitated the adaptation of Marxism in China. Moreover, this adaptation cannot be easily copied by other societies. “Just because he [Mao] has succeeded by depending on this heritage,” Metzger wrote, “he has failed to devise a universally valid path of development which can be readily

¹⁷ Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, 134-145.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 138.

followed by societies with basically different cultural traditions.”¹⁹ What is implicit in this statement is that the seemingly universal Marxism can only be universal by being matched with the specific cultural heritage. It is not Western Marxism that “displaced” Confucianism, but the deeply rooted cultural orientation that transformed Marxism. Indeed, the adoption of Marxism in China manifested itself not so much as a product of rational analysis of Chinese society as the *continuation* of a traditional way of thinking. In Marx’s theory, socialist revolution could only take place in a highly industrialized society where material conditions prepare the mature working class to overthrow the hegemony of the bourgeois class. Infrastructure determines the superstructure, and the material condition determines the symbolic regime, not the other way around. However, in the Chinese case, at the very inception of Marxism, material condition was regarded as secondary to the universal and moral value manifested in the revolutionary theory. Arif Dirlik observed that although the Chinese intellectuals became acquainted with Marxism as early as the 1910s, “their grasp of historical materialism remained superficial through the early twentieth.”²⁰ In other words, Marxism in China exhibited a reversal of Marxism by Marx. It is the *idea* of revolution and internationalism that addressed the Chinese intellectuals’ desire to find a substitute moral order, the *idea* that drove Chinese society to develop into socialism.²¹ In a society that lacked industrialization and a mature proletariat class, a society that was only later discovered as a “semi-feudal, semi-colonial society”

¹⁹Thomas Metzger, *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China’s Evolving Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 233.

²⁰Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: The Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919-1937* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1978), 2.

²¹Dirlik argued that Marxist historical materialism provided a theoretical framework to explain the contemporary revolutionary change, which constituted a major appeal of Marxism to Chinese intellectuals. Yet I believe that the Chinese “material/revolutionary condition” was quite different from what Marx described in his theory. This only proved that the Chinese “discovered” their material condition later after they had already accepted the value of Marxism. It is the *Idea* of Marxism that drove the new conception of Chinese society, and the idea, from my view, was but the *continuation and manifestation* of traditional way of thinking.

according to Marxist historical materialism, Marxism in China revealed first and foremost its moral and universal symbolic value.

Indeed, as a substitution for Confucianism, Marxism appealed to Chinese intellectuals not only for its ethical potential to achieve nationalism against imperialism, but also for its universal ideal to establish a utopian world order that was beyond narrowly-defined nationalism. Communism, the higher stage of socialism, provided such a classless, nationless blueprint for the future, which for better or worse, corresponded in their minds to the traditional ideal of Great Harmony or Grand Unity (da tong, 大同), an ideal of the unified empire in which all the subjects enjoy material and spiritual abundance.²²

In sum, the interplay between the material and the spiritual, the attraction of Marxism in forms of both nationalism and internationalism, unconsciously manifests the all-encompassing traditional way of thinking, an imperial moral regime that is independent of, and transcendent over, the specific political and material conditions, which continually reveals its unifying, perpetuating function in Chinese history. The totality of this moral order, which I characterize as the “imperial-time regime,” is from the very beginning bound up with the vision of empire, of time, and of moral agency, and is resilient enough to produce its own sub-regime to outlive any specific historical periods, including the modern era.

²² Guo Moruo once participated in a debate with the nationalists about whether Marxism was good for nationalistic pursuit. He argued that the higher stage of Communism, like the Confucian notion of the Great Harmony, would create a classless, nationless world, which is trans-nationalistic. Yet before that utopian world, Communism has to be centered on building the nation state with a proletarian class, which is in nature nationalistic. Thus, there is no contradiction between nationalism and trans-nationalism in Communism. See Guo Moruo, “Xin guojia de chuangzao” (The creation of the new nation) in *Hongshui* (Torrent), Vol1, issue 8. 1926. See 创造社资料 (Materials of Chuangzao society), 伊藤虎丸, ed., (東京: アジア出版, 1979), Vol. 6, 255.

The imperial-time regime

Traditionally, the historical consciousness is the one that closely correlates with the conception of Empire, whose unification is deemed normal and moral. Since the birth of the Chinese Empire, unification and morality have been bound together, and the ultimate morality resides in the “Mandate of Heaven” (*tian ming* 天命) or the “Intention of Heaven” (*tian yi* 天意), a concept that gives the ruling house legitimacy to rule and is in tune with the cosmic-imperial order in which Heaven, Earth, and Humanity are in harmony. This imperial moral order, articulated and institutionalized in the Han Dynasty, was believed to have been perfectly fulfilled in the Western Zhou period (1065-771BCE). According to Confucian canons, the early Zhou period offers an idealized model of utopian empire with the perfect fusion of unification and morality. The later imperial regimes should look up to, and model themselves after, this lost utopia in the past golden age to restore or maintain order. The nostalgic longing for a nonexistent past not only sets the moralistic tone for the Chinese imperial order, but also doubles the imperial vision by differentiating the imagined past ideal from the imperfect present reality. From the fissure between the ideal and the reality emerges both the moral constraint for the present emperors and the moral authority for the past sages. Scholars have suggested that Confucian canons have established such a superior moral order transcending specific historical periods that the “uncrowned King” Confucius could survive the entirety of Chinese history.²³ Emperors, and their associated empires, have to insert their political institutions into this imperial moral order to justify their rule, not the other way around.

However, the lasting influence and authoritative power of this imperial moral order do not lie in the presence of any absolute moral agency, but in contrast, in its absence. The Sage, or rather, the sages, are by and large the instrument of a totalizing

²³ Michael Nylan, *The Five Confucian Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

morality. Just as Confucius claimed that he was merely a transmitter of the past sages' morals, all the sages function as the messenger, instead of the creator, of this imperial moral order. Heaven, as an absolute deterministic figure, fills the void of moral agency, which demonstrates its omniscient presence with absence as such.

For instance, Xunzi (荀子), a prominent disciple of Confucius, once discussed the Dao (Way)-in-Heaven mechanism in his rather notorious "Discourse about Heaven" (*Tianlun*, 天论) in this way:

The course of Nature (*tian*天) is constant: it does not survive because of the actions of a Yao; it does not perish because of the action of a Jie. If you respond to the constancy of Nature's course with good government, there will be good fortune; if you respond to it with disorder, there will be misfortune. If you strengthen the basic undertakings and moderate expenditures, Nature cannot impoverish you. If your nourishment is complete and your movements accord with the season, then Nature cannot afflict you with illness. If you conform to the Way and are not of two minds, then Nature cannot bring about calamity....If you ignore the basic undertakings and spend extravagantly, then Nature cannot enrich you....If you turn your back on the Way and behave with foolish recklessness, then Nature cannot bring good fortune. Accordingly, there will be famine when neither flood nor drought has come, there will be sickness when neither heat nor cold has reached you, and there will be misfortune even though inauspicious and freak events have not occurred. Although the seasons are received just the same as in an orderly age, the catastrophes and calamities will be of a different order [of magnitude] from those of an orderly age; and you can have no cause to curse Nature, for these things are the consequences of the way that you have followed. Accordingly, if you understand the division between Nature and mankind, then you can probably be called a "Perfect Man."²⁴

天行有常，不为尧存，不为桀亡。应之以治则吉，应之以乱则凶。强本而节用，则天不能贫；养备而动时，则天不能病；循道而不贰，则天不能祸。…本荒而用侈，则天不能使之富；…倍道而妄行，则天不能使之吉。故水旱未至而饥，寒暑未薄而疾，妖怪未至[生]而凶。受时与治世同，而殃祸与治世异，不可以怨天，其道然也。故明于天人之分，则可谓至人矣。

²⁴ Xunzi, *Tian Lun*. Translated by John Knoblock, in *Xunzi—A Translation and Study of the Complete Works* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), Vol III, 14-5.

According to Xunzi, there is an intrinsic order inside Heaven/Nature, and it is the order of Heaven that shapes the human order, the pattern of history. The difference between good fortune and bad fortune thus resides in the way human beings obey the Heavenly order. If one behaves like the sage ruler Yao following the Way of Heaven, Heaven will respond with blessings; however, if one acts like the brutal ruler Jie, Heaven will deliver punishment to the kingdom. Therefore, it is the contemporary ruler's responsibility to seek the order of Heaven and follow the way of ancient sages.

The mechanism of “obey-Heaven-and-imitate-antiquity” (feng tian er fa gu 奉天而法古) was most explicitly articulated in the *Chunqiu fanlu* (春秋繁露) by Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒, a Confucian scholar-official in the Han Dynasty):

The *Dao* (Way) of spring and autumn (history, or time) is to accord to Heaven and imitate antiquity. Therefore, if you don't build using compass and square, even with skillful hands, you cannot correct the round or square shape; if you don't practice the six tones (*liulü*), even with alert ears, you cannot set the five pitches; if you don't study the ancient kings, even with great intuition, you cannot pacify all under Heaven (*Tianxia*). However, the bequeathed Way of the ancient kings is also the compass and square and the tones of all under Heaven! Consequently, the sages obey Heaven, and the virtuous imitate the sages, thus is the deterministic way (*da shu*). If one obtains this deterministic way, the world will be in order; if one loses the deterministic way, the world will be in disorder. This sets the difference between order and disorder. It is said that there is no more than one Way (*dao*) of all under Heaven, so even if there is difference among the sagely rulers, they basically follow the same principle. The present and antiquity can communicate with ease. This is why the ancient sages bestowed their principles on the later generations.

春秋之道，奉天而法古。是故虽有巧手，弗修规矩，不能正方圆；虽有察耳，不吹六律，不能定五音；虽有知心，不览先王，不能平天下；然则先王之遗道，亦天下之规矩六律已！故圣者法天，贤者法圣，此其大数也；得大数而治，失大数而乱，此治乱之分也；所闻天下无二道，故圣人异治同理也，古今通达，故先贤传其法于后世也。

For Dong Zhongshu, there is only one principle of Heaven which transcends time and space and still lives in the present, yet there could be multiple ways of actualizing the Heavenly *Dao*. The one-multiple schema in Dong's statement at once confirms the transcendent Heavenly Way and the contingency of human behavior. The hierarchy that he sets among Heaven, sages, and virtuous men in terms of morality suggests a temporal gap defined by moral order within the present. Human agency in this regard exhibits itself as no more than the limited moral practitioner subsumed under the order of antiquity. Falling along a spectrum that ranges between impossible poles of definitive agency and inevitable lack, Heaven in this way gives rise to the speculation that the ultimate moral subjectivity is *time*, and it is time with its moral import that engenders the enduring centripetal forces along Chinese history.

Indeed, as Gilles Deleuze observed, time is the ultimate subjectivity. It is we who are internal to time, not the other way around.²⁵ This kind of historical consciousness, divergent from the Cartesian vision of the omnipotent human subjectivity, has been prevalent throughout Chinese history. However, in the Chinese view, far from being a natural, mechanistic, referential parameter outside human beings, time is intertwined with human activity. The moralization of time has at once stressed human agency and undermined this agency. The association of the past with authority and morality on the one hand deprives the present of its innovative agency; on the other hand, however, it manifests the temporal nature of this imperial moral order. Past legitimizes present and bespeaks future. Together it is time that constructs a moral order that is transmitted through the Sage's mouth, one order that organizes the institutional imperial regime to become the instrument for its self-perpetuation. Meanwhile, in this moral order, unification is deemed normal and morality associated

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2—The Time Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson & Robert Galeta, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 82-3.

with order, whereas disunity is seen as abnormal and immorality associated with disorder. Time normalizes unification and universalizes morality, constituting an “imperial-time regime” which transcends specific historical periods and continually manifests its driving force for unification in Chinese civilization. The imperial court has to comply with this “imperial-time regime” to show that they have the “Mandate of Heaven” (*tian ming* 天命) or the “Time of Heaven” (*tian shi* 天时) to legitimize the existence of the imperial court. It is time assigned with moral mission that continually reproduces itself, articulates itself, and perpetuates itself.

However, the doubling structure of the “imperial-time regime,” the unavoidable gap between the past ideal and the present reality, suggests that time is split up as being both morally transcendent and amorally contingent in the present. Besides its unity-prone moral tendency, the “imperial-time regime” is accompanied with its own sub-regime, from which a morally neutral term “*shi*” (势) emerges. *Shi*, equivalent with [historical] force, or [historical] trend, signifies both historical determinism and the virtual possibilities intrinsic in the determinism. “The historical trend (*shi*) of *Tianxia* (all under Heaven) is one in which unification is determined to follow long-term disunity, and disunity is determined to succeed long-term unification.” So reads the opening line of the classic narrative *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi*). Thus *shi* could point to either unification or division, the multifaceted virtuality in time, but unification, with its overpowering moral implication, still dominates disunity in the symbolic realm, and renders the imperial-time regime a lasting one in Chinese history. In other words, whereas the imperial-time regime as a paradigmatic in time manifests the transcendent moral order, *shi*, on the other hand, demonstrates that specific moments in history may not be transcended.

Time, in this regard, exhibits a dialectical interchange within itself between its two layers. It is at once concrete and universal, factual and normative.²⁶

This notion of time, though institutionalized in Confucian canons, nevertheless cannot be reduced to Confucianism. Rather, it is a kind of imperial thinking instead of thought, embracing Confucianism, Daoism, and ancient dialectical thinking. On the other hand, rather than being impersonal and outside of human beings, the imperial-time regime, in both its layers, is fundamentally humanistic. The *shi*, albeit amoral as such, is a kind of situational timeliness, not of empirical events but a humanly shaped milieu.²⁷

Indeed, time and history in the Chinese sense was the constant interplay between transcendent time and immanent human beings. Witnessing history and living *in* time, human beings immediately realized their limited agency to grasp the transcendence of time by means of their everyday moral behavior. By emulating the past sages, they were able to experience time in a both immanent and transcendent way. Chen Chi-yun described it as “immanent human beings in transcendent time.” Drawing a sweeping civilizational contrast between the ancient Greeks who tried their utmost to think transcendently and the ancient Chinese who tended to thinking immanently, Chen asserted that the Chinese philosopher, particularly the Confucian thinker Xunzi (荀子), inclined to avoid seeking to understand the transcendent, since for him “human beings cannot but act immanently.”²⁸ Yet while “knowing that ‘transcendent time’ may be beyond their empirical reach, the Chinese nonetheless made endless trials to figure out their respective standing in time.”²⁹ They were not

²⁶ Chun-Chieh Huang, “‘Time’ and ‘Supertime’ in Chinese Historical Thinking,” in *Notions of Time in Chinese Historical Thinking*, eds., Chun-chieh Huang & John B. Henderson, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2006). Introduction. 28.

²⁷ Ibid. 20.

²⁸ Chen Chi-yun, “Immanent Human Beings in Transcendent Time” in *Notions of Time in Chinese Historical Thinking*, eds., Chun-chieh Huang & John B. Henderson, 60.

²⁹ Ibid. 63.

unaware of the “realm of the transcendent as well as its ontic importance, but thought that this (the transcendent) could better be hinted at, or alluded to, rather than clearly represented and expressly discussed in mundane human terms.”³⁰

The “respective standing” of human beings *in* time, on the one hand manifested the consciousness of the impersonal force of time superimposed on human beings; on the other hand, however, confirmed the centrality of human agency in eliciting moral meaning through time. In fact, even though the historical *shi-trend* was outside individuals and out of control, what one could do was to follow the *shi*, directing it into its trend, and thus accomplish the moral meaning of time.

Shi, observed Chun-chieh Huang, contained several characteristic features, among which events and human agency were two intertwined points that deserve our attention. According to Huang, *shi*, rather than a mere scattered “propensity of things,” is the dynamic trend among events. Thus, historians study events, “not because they are interested in events per se, but because they want to discern the *shi* stretching among the events.” Meanwhile, in all this inexorability of the *shi*, human agency plays a crucial role in grasping the *shi* to actualize Heaven’s will. Huang convincingly presented the prevalent occurrences of the notion of *shi* in the early texts prior to and during the Warring States period (403-256BCE) and explained the centrality of human activities in molding the *shi* and being molded by the *shi*.³¹ Just as the old saying describes it, heroes mold *shi* while *shi* shapes heroes. *Shi*, therefore, is both material and spiritual, which constitutes a sense of contingency that allows human beings to act relatively freely in accordance with Heaven’s order. “Timeliness in situational flux,

³⁰ Ibid. 65.

³¹ Chun-chieh Huang, “‘Time’ and ‘Supertime’ in Chinese Historical Thinking,” in *Notions of Time in Chinese Historical Thinking*, 23.

shi,” Huang asserted, “is steered by human beings, whose destinies in turn are decided by *shi*. Such intermoldings constitute the history to be taught in later generations.”³²

Whereas the centrality of human activity is well stressed, it is important not to confuse the limited human agency with omniscient human agency in relation to time. As the Song Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi (朱熹1130-1200) said, “Following *shi* to guide and lead on—of this only sages are capable.”³³ While he acknowledged the function of the sages to participate in molding *shi* in history, the term “following” nonetheless gives rise to the ultimate agency as time, as Heaven, whose moral order determines the success or failure of the human activity.

The rulers, emperors, thus, have to submit themselves to this imperial-time regime to display their sagely quality, following the *shi-trend* in order to create a peaceful world to fulfill the “Mandate of Heaven.” Ye Shi (叶适, 1150-1223), a Neo-Confucian scholar of the Song dynasty, was explicit about the relationship between the emperors and the *shi*. In his words,

If one desires to govern all under Heaven without looking at its *shi*, then nothing under Heaven can be ruled...[Now] such ancient rulers as Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, [emperors] Gaozu and Guangwu of the Han, and [emperor] Taizong of the Tang, all individually accomplished the *shi* of all under Heaven. Although their merits and virtues differed in greatness, [hence] their differences in the effectiveness of governance, they still wanted to shoulder the *shi* of all under Heaven onto themselves, not on anything outside.... Later generations saw *shi* to lie in things outside, not in oneself. Therefore, when the *shi* came, it came as if it were a flood and could not be stopped. What the rulers did was just to raise all their powers to help advance its tide. [This was done until the *shi* receded, and then fell] so that we could only sit and [idly] see [its recession], and no one could stop it, and the nation followed it to perdition. In fact, being unable to personally accomplish the *shi* of all under Heaven, vainly trying to solicit private safety by using petty laws of penalties and punishment to follow the *shi* of all under Heaven, this I your subject have not seen to work [at all].

³² Ibid. 23.

³³ Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi yulei*. (The discourse of Zhu Xi), ed., Li Jingde, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), vol 8, Zhuan 139, 3303.

欲治天下而不见其势，天下不可治矣。。。。古之人君，若尧、舜、禹、汤、文、武、汉之高祖光武，唐之太宗，此其人皆能以一身为天下之势；虽其功德有厚薄，治效有浅深，而要以为天下之势在己不在物。。。。及其后世，天下之势在物而不在己，故其势之至也，汤汤然而莫能遏，反举人君威福之柄以佐其锋；至其去也，坐视而不能止，而国家随之以亡。夫不能以一身为天下势，而用区以刑法以就天下之势而求安其身者，臣未见其可也。³⁴

Clearly, Ye Shi's notion of Heaven and time is different from Xunzi's seemingly mechanistic vision of Heaven in the earlier period. The Neo-Confucian's self-reflexive mode to interiorize the moral principle of the world is well manifested in this passage. However, although Ye Shi declared the responsibility of the rulers to internalize and shoulder the *shi* of all under Heaven and to steer the *shi* to a positive, moral direction, *shi* by itself seems to be amoral, which could be flowing in either good or evil ways. If the ruler just lets the *shi* flow without any action or worse, takes advantage of the *shi* to reinforce his personal power instead of concerning all under Heaven, his rule will be doomed to being terminated shortly. By contrasting the sagely, successful rulers/emperors with the failed ones who could only make use of laws and punishment to gain private benefit, Ye Shi in effect distinguished the benevolent, moral *shi* actualized by the sagely rulers, which is connected to the *shi* of all under Heaven (hence the Mandate of Heaven), and the amoral *shi* which will shape the world into a chaotic state.

³⁴ Ye Shi (叶适), "Zhishi" (治势) in *Shuixin xiansheng wenji* (Collection of essays by Ye Shi), Sibucongkan jibu, (Shanghai: Shangwu yishuguan, 1922), vol 2, juan 4. This quote is also used by Chun-chieh Huang. Yet Huang takes this quote to demonstrate that human agency is at the core of the formation of *shi*-trend. I take a different point of view. I think for Ye Shi, *shi* itself is amoral which could be steered to either positive or negative directions. It is the ruler's responsibility to direct (rather than form) the *shi* in a positive, moral way as he interiorizes the moral principle of Heaven. Otherwise, if he takes advantage of the *shi* only to reinforce his own power, his rule won't last, since he has lost the "Mandate of Heaven."

Human agency, therefore, is moral. Only with morality, following the *shi* of all under Heaven, imitating the ancient sage rulers who embodied the Mandate of Heaven, could the rulers be able to maintain a unified, peaceful, prosperous empire (*zhi shi* 治世). On the other hand, without morality, abusing the amoral *shi* for personal benefit, the rulers will lose the Mandate of Heaven and hence direct the empire into chaos (*luan shi* 乱世).

Such is the imperial-time regime, the symbolic moral order that continually enfolds the Chinese Empire (or empires in terms of different dynasties) into its ultrastable, cyclical pattern. The transcendent moral time, on the one hand confirms the human agency to follow the *shi* of all under Heaven, which structures the centripetal trend to maintain a unified imperial order. On the other hand, however, it at once undermines this agency by subjugating it to the remote past. Meanwhile, failing to follow the moral past will lead to chaos since the amoral *shi* will display its centrifugal force to pull the empire apart. Time, in this regard, perpetuates moral agency and manifests itself in a circular manner: it constantly articulates morality at times of unification yet meanwhile produces its own discontent generating disunity which again calls for unification. Perhaps, the dynastic cycle of Chinese history best annotates this imperial-time regime: its centripetal force dominates the centrifugal force and drives the Chinese imperial history into a cyclical, spiral pattern. It is time that subsumes the institutional empires and constantly manifests itself in a process of continuous folding, unfolding, and refolding.³⁵

³⁵ The notion of fold was introduced by Deleuze in his discussion on Leibniz's philosophy and Baroque aesthetics. For Deleuze, fold is a temporal concept that signifies the spatial-temporal dynamic in the process of subjectivation and identity formation. It is as if in a temporal dimension, a singular identity is closed in space yet open in time. It is time that becomes the ultimate exteriority whose folding is what constitutes the process of subject formation. See Gilles Deleuze. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

It is common to view time in imperial Chinese history as cyclical, yet it in no way means mere repetition without progression. As Chen Chi-yun pointed out, “the Chinese never claimed that real history (even dynastic history) or time ever ‘repeated’ itself.”³⁶ Similarly, after studying the Confucian Classic *Yijing* (Book of Changes), Liu Shu-hsien asserted that the *Yijing*, famous for its dialectical thinking, did not teach a cyclical philosophy of history in terms of recurrent repetition. Rather, “each cycle offers a new content, which cannot be seen as a mere repetition or going by circles.”³⁷

Walter Benjamin once distinguished conceptions of time as pre-modern Messianic time and modern “homogeneous, empty time,”³⁸ which inspired Benedict Anderson to take time as the point of departure to distinguish the imaginings of classical and modern communities.³⁹ For Benjamin, Messianic time means that past and future coexist in the instantaneous present in the eyes of God, something eternal and omnitemporal. On the other hand, the concept of “homogeneous, empty time” is one “in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar.”⁴⁰ Challenging Anderson’s radical division between the premodern and modern time, Prasenjit Duara reconstructed the continuity of history, stating that “we in the present together with our caller from the past, are coproducers of the past.” Thereby the present consists of the past—“It is more in the nature of a relay, a translation or a ‘return call.’”⁴¹ Indeed, in terms of its dialectical and morally

³⁶ Chen Chi-yun, “Immanent Human Beings in Transcendent Time,” in *Notions of Time in Chinese Historical Thinking*, 48.

³⁷ Liu Shu-hsien, “On the Formation of a Philosophy of Time and History through the *Yijing*,” in *Notions of Time in Chinese Historical Thinking*, 91-92.

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 263-4.

³⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised edition. (London & New York: Verso, 2006), 24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 24.

⁴¹ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 73.

transcendent nature, the Chinese notion of time diverges from both the Messianic time and the homogeneous, empty time. Rather, it is a reconstructive approach to time, one that exhibits itself as analogous to Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche's "eternal return." Since any step further is made in reference to its origin (imagined origin), the Chinese time is the repetition with (qualitative) difference, which continually generates the ever-expanding spirals, instead of circles, pointing both to the past and the future. The imperial-time regime, therefore, transcends time and space, organizing history into its cyclical-yet-progressive pattern.

Historical unconscious: the imperial-time regime in modern times

The all-encompassing imperial-time regime, as a way of thinking, does not cease to penetrate into the modern period. Instead, this double-layered symbolic regime reveals its paradigmatic resilience in a rather disguised way in a modern nation state. The imperial institution disappears, yet unification and its morality stays; human subjectivity emerges, yet the vision of history remains. In fact, the ready acceptance of historical teleology is manifested as nothing other than the strengthening consciousness of historical determinism. The difference merely lies in that one is forward-looking, the other is backward-and-forward-looking (in terms of its perpetuating value); one is materially dominant, the other is morally dominant. Yet, the moral crisis in the early capitalist development soon found its cure in Marxism. Indeed, the triumph of totalitarian Marxism in China proves no more than the unconscious survival of an imperial moral order that could both enunciate morality and transcend the national boundaries. The appeal of internationalism to modern Chinese demonstrates the undying impact of the imperial moral order and China's persistent resistance to being confined within a national boundary.

In fact, as demonstrated earlier in this chapter, the adoption of Marxism as a substitution of Chinese thought has from the beginning differed from Marxist historical materialism in terms of China's social condition, which nonetheless manifests the centuries-long vision of the relationship between the spiritual/moral and the material.⁴²

The significance of historical materialism in the evolution of modern Chinese historical outlook was most explicitly discussed by Arif Dirlik.⁴³ Dirlik pointed out that the materialist conception of history provided a fundamentally new perspective and methodology for Chinese historians to write a "new" history of China. First, instead of discerning "moral lessons" from the scattered, non-causal events, the socioeconomic approach allowed the historians to "bind events together in a causal nexus and treat them as connected wholes."⁴⁴ Second, in contrast to Levenson's vision that Marxism fulfilled Chinese intellectuals' nationalistic sentiment by both negating Confucianism and negating imperialism, Dirlik argued that Marxist materialism offered a materially based theory to "explain the social dimensions of contemporary revolutionary change," and "it also expressed in the realm of history the new, revolutionary paradigm of change."⁴⁵

While there was indeed a materialistic overtone in modern Chinese historical thinking, Dirlik nonetheless overly simplified traditional historical thinking and shelved the difference between the Marxist principle and the Chinese applications. In one sense, the fact that the Chinese historians so overly identified with the ideological

⁴² The success of the Russian Revolution in 1917 provided a promising future for the Chinese revolutionaries regarding the Chinese socioeconomic condition, which prompted them to examine Chinese society and rewrite history with materialist sensitivity. Yet as scholars have demonstrated, the Chinese intellectuals were first drawn to Marxism for its ideological and universal value.

⁴³ Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: the Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919-1937* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1978).

⁴⁴ E. G. Pulleyblank, "Chinese Historical Criticism," in *Historians of China and Japan*, eds. W.G.Beasley and E.G.Pulleyblank, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 152.

⁴⁵ Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: the Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919-1937*, 18.

function of Marxism instead of its structural, material basis suggests that the superstructural ideal dominates the objective infrastructure, which is none other than the extension of the morality-driven historical way of thinking. Dirlik admitted that the Chinese Marxist historians often selectively ignored or dismissed the data that did not fit into their ideologically determinant preconceptions.⁴⁶ Such a “defective” treatment of Marxist historiography unavoidably undermines the fundamental principle of materialism. In another sense, the desire to pursue revolutionary change in Chinese society was but another manifestation of the desire to seek the *shi*-trend among discursive events in traditional historical thinking.

The deviation from Marxism in China’s revolutionary practice is keenly observed by Slavoj Žižek. Žižek asserted that Lenin’s theory of “the weakest link of the chain” extended the original Marxist theory, yet only with Mao was the original model radically abandoned. Although Lenin accepted that the first revolution can take place not in the most developed country, but in a country in which antagonisms of the capitalist development are most aggravated, even if it is less developed, he still perceived the October Revolution as a risky breakthrough whose success could only be maintained by being followed with large-scale Western European revolution.⁴⁷ However, for Mao, the materialist Marxist model was totally reversed. Not only could the revolution be achieved in the least developed country, but the class struggle was reformulated as the contradiction between the First World “bourgeois nations” and the Third World “proletarian nations.” Moreover, since the economic condition could not automatically engender socialist revolution, the communist ideal should lead to the assertion of the “primacy of politics over economy.”⁴⁸ In Žižek’s words,

⁴⁶ Dirlik, *Revolution and History*, 11.

⁴⁷ Slavoj Žižek, “Mao Zedong: The Marxist Lord of Misrule” refer to <http://www.lacan.com/zizmaozedong.htm>. This passage cannot be found in the published version when Žižek presents Mao’s *On Practice and Contradiction* (London & New York: Verso, 2007).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The paradox here is properly dialectical, perhaps in the ultimate application of Mao's teaching on contradictions: its very underdevelopment (and thus "un-ripeness" for the revolution) makes a country "ripe" for the revolution. Since, however, such "unripe" economic conditions do not allow the construction of properly post-capitalist socialism, the necessary correlate is the assertion of the "primacy of politics over economy": the victorious revolutionary subject doesn't act as an instrument of economic necessity, liberating its potentials whose further development is thwarted by capitalist contradictions; it is rather a voluntarist agent which acts AGAINST "spontaneous" economic necessity, enforcing its vision on reality through revolutionary terror.⁴⁹

Zizek confirmed the Maoist reversal of Marxism in terms of economy/political relations, and he saw the Chinese revision as a historical contingency only to be applauded or blamed as necessity later retroactively. Yet he did not resolve the contradiction between the "contingency" and "the voluntarist" agency: if the (collective) agent is voluntary, how come the *revision* becomes contingent? What's the psychological conditioning for the agent to achieve such a "contingency"? To answer such a question we have to refer to the historical mode of thinking that determined this "contingent" change. Perhaps, the paradoxical "ripe" and "unripe" condition for the revolution, which is hard to understand in the Marxist framework, should be put into the historical *shi*-trend framework, which emphasizes the moral aspect over the economic aspect in the earlier uprisings and shifts of dynasties.

Needless to say, such a discussion of historical continuity cannot avoid being subjectively simplistic, yet what I am trying to describe is a sense of historical unconscious that was translated into theoretical substitutions. Indeed, although on the surface, there are fundamental discrepancies between traditional historical thinking and Marxist historiography, the underlying assumptions on time and history nonetheless exhibit a similar pattern. Although the linear, progressive time in Marxism ostensibly contradicts the Chinese cyclical time, the Marxist periodization of history is

⁴⁹ Ibid.

in effect perfectly compatible with Chinese historical thinking. Since the entire Chinese imperial history could be put into one phase “feudal society” in Marxist historiography,⁵⁰ the cyclical pattern of Chinese history does not conflict with the Marxist overview of the progressive historical stages. On the contrary, the class analysis from another perspective explains the Chinese notion of *shi* and the moral agency of human beings. For Marx, the antagonism between classes in an exploitative society is determined to be intensified until a certain point, based on certain material conditions of the society, when the revolution breaks out and a new period comes onto the horizon. This periodization implies a sort of historical determinism that the revolutionary trend is irreversible and the exploited class will surely *follow* the trend when the revolutionary conditions are ripe. Echoing the Chinese notion of *shi*, Marxist historical periodization nonetheless offers a model to interpret the dynastic shift in Chinese history, in both moral and material senses. When the former dynasty has lost the “Mandate of Heaven” (usually the starved peasants rose to rebellion, and the material revolutionary condition is mature), the sagely rulers will grasp the *shi* to insert a new dynasty (period) into history in succession of the former. In this regard, the Marxist historical thinking turns out to be no more than another form of the imperial-time regime, with the latter determining the very acceptance of the former.⁵¹

⁵⁰ There were debates on Chinese historical periodization according to Marxist historiography during the 1930s and 1940s. Yet after 1949, the five-stage history became the orthodox version of Chinese historical periodization. See Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History*.

⁵¹ For instance, the Marxist historian Shi Cuntong (Shih Ts'un-t'ung) once introduced the idea of historical materialism. Although he stressed the socioeconomic basis for the revolutionary consciousness in terms of the conflict between the relations and forces of production, he nonetheless put the material conditions as the deterministic element for the revolution. “When the material conditions are ripe,” he said, “all questions are resolved.” Material conditions determine the revolutionary consciousness and the revolutionary result. For me, this material condition resembles a Chinese notion of *shi*, which is humanly formed yet out of individual control and historically non-transcendable. See Shi Cuntong, “Weiwu shiguan zai Zhongguo de yingyong” (The application of historical materialism in China), in *Shehui zhuyi taolun ji* (Discussions on Socialism) (Shanghai: Xin Qingnian Society, 1922), 427-8. A more specific discussion on historical time was made by the Japanese Marxist scholar Tosaka Jun (1900-1945). In my view, he incorporated Bergson’s notion of duration with Nietzsche’s “eternal return” and the traditional notion of “*shi*-trend.” After arguing that time is heterogeneous instead of homogeneous, he asserted that periodization of history depends on the character (content) of history,

In fact, since the very inception of Marxism, it has been seen as the arrival of a new “historical trend” and it is the Chinese people’s responsibility to grasp this trend in order to enter into a new period of history. In 1918, upon the success of the socialist revolution in the Soviet Union, Li Dazhao published two articles to celebrate the victory of the working class and Bolshevism. For him, it was “the victory of the new tide (chao liu 潮流) of the 20th century,”⁵² and “we should be clear that we can only *follow* this tide, not *resist* this tide.” (emphasis mine).⁵³ Socialism is the irresistible, legitimate trend of the world. “Such mighty rolling tides are indeed beyond the power of the present capitalist governments to prevent or stop, for the mass movement of the twentieth century combines the whole of mankind into one great mass. The efforts of each individual within this great mass...will then be concentrated and become a great, irresistible social force... In the course of such a world mass movement, all those dregs of history that can impede the progress of the new movement—such as emperors, nobles, warlords, bureaucrats, militarists, and capitalists—will certainly be destroyed as though struck by a thunderbolt.”⁵⁴ Such a voluntaristic and deterministic attitude to embrace Marxism and socialism, according to Maurice Meisner, manifests Li’s effort to resolve a Marxist dilemma over how to reconcile economic determinism and political activism. In his comprehensive study on Li Dazhao, Meisner observed that

which is in turn determined by the material relations and forces of production. Yet the character is not something human beings can just think up or create, it is produced by history itself. “Character is like the fruit which when ripe, on its own it drops from the tree of history. When it does fall, people must catch it without fail. It is best to say that people only *discover* certain characters within history. But it must also be said that in what manner people faithfully receive this fruit depends on the character of the people themselves.” For me, this is the Confucian way of thinking about history, the exteriority of *shi*-trend and the interiority of human’s grasp of that *shi*-character. See Tosaka Jun, “Nichijosei no genri to rekichiteki jikan” (The Principle of Everydayness and Historical Time) (1934), trans. Robert Stolz. Translated from *Tosaka Jun zenshu*, vol.3 (Tokyo: Keiso Shobo, 1966), 95-104.

⁵² Li Dazhao, “Bolshevism de shengli” (The victory of Bolshevism), in *Xin qingnian* (New youth), Nov 15, 1918. See Chen Shouli, ed., *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shiliao zhaibian*, vol 1, 26.

⁵³ Li Dazhao, “Shumin de shengli” (The victory of the ordinary people), in *Xin qingnian* (New youth), Oct. 15, 1918. See Chen Shouli, ed., *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shiliao zhaibian*, vol 1, 24.

⁵⁴ Li Dazhao, “Bolshevism de shengli,” 26. Also cited and translated by Maurice Meisner in *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism*, 68.

Li's pre-Marxian worldview and social activism determined his inventive interpretation of Marxist principle. By interpreting China as a "proletarian nation" in which the internal proletarian class did not really exist and the collective moral endeavor as the fundamental materiality of revolution, Li was able to turn the material disadvantage into advantage to achieve the revolutionary goal. In Meisner's words:

From perceiving Bolshevism as a portent of the long-awaited rebirth of the Chinese nation it was but a short step to perceiving this national rebirth as an integral part of the universal forces of regeneration, represented by the world proletarian movement. Although certain aspects of Marxian historical determinism had appeals of their own, Marxist theoretical considerations were not to be allowed to stand in the way of China's alliance with the new forces of historical reformation. In Li Ta-chao's optimistic and dialectical world view, disadvantages were converted into advantages to consummate this alliance with history. If China lacked a developed urban proletariat to carry on the class struggle, then the whole nation must be looked upon as part of the world-wide forces of proletarian revolution. If the economic preconditions for the realization of socialism were absent in China, then the socialist reorganization of Chinese society was all the more necessary to achieve these very preconditions.⁵⁵ (154)

To Meisner, Li's voluntaristic and nationalistic interpretation of Marxism was indebted to his pre-Marxian world view in which "by activity in the present the individual could become identified with the great progressive 'tide of reality' and reach a future where 'the universe is the ego and the ego is the universe.'"⁵⁶ This metaphysical understanding of time and history, seen by Meisner as one that is similar to the philosophy of Henri Bergson,⁵⁷ compatible with the Neo-Confucian impulse to transform the self and the society investigated by Metzger, in effect reveals the penetrating power of the imperial-time regime.

⁵⁵ Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967; reprinted New York: Atheneum, 1979), 154.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 51.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 49.

If Li Dazhao (1889-1927), the early Chinese Marxist and one of the founders of the Communist Party, is seen as the immature Marxist in modern China whose statement does not represent the evolution of Chinese Marxism, Guo Moruo, the prominent Marxist historian and writer in Mao's regime, still never gave up building the link between Marxism and Confucianism, which suggests that there is something that allows the two thoughts to be completely compatible. In Guo's imaginative writing, Marx came to China to meet Confucius, only to find out that Confucius was his Chinese "comrade." "I have never thought that two thousand years ago," Marx said, "in the Far East, there was already such an old comrade [like you]. Our opinions are totally in accord."⁵⁸ Later, in 1948, after Guo had become a more mature Marxist historian, he still held the opinion that Communism was but the modern manifestation of the ancient Confucian ideal *da tong* (大同, Great Harmony or Grand Unity). In an article addressed to overseas Chinese, Guo juxtaposed Mao Zedong, Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen), and Mencius, implying that they all shared the same ideal about "Great Harmony." In his words,

Please think about it: what is too radical about Mr. Mao's thought? Isn't the land reform the realization of Mr. Sun Zhongshan's idea that "whoever works on the land will have his own land?" To speculate further, isn't it the realization of what Mencius dreamed about in the well-field system (*jing tian zhi* 井田制) more than two thousand years ago? Mr. Mao is surely a disciple of Communism, yet isn't Communism the reification of what Confucius advocated as the Great Harmony or the Grand Unity (*da tong* 大同) more than two thousand years ago? Therefore, strictly speaking, Mr. Sun Zhongshan should also be a Communist. Even Confucius and Mencius who lived more than two thousand years ago might be Communist Party members had they been born in the present period.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Guo Moruo, "Makesi jin wenmiao" (Marx came to the Confucian temple) in *Hongshui* (Torrent) 1925, Vol.1, Issue 7, 1925. See 伊藤虎丸, ed., 创造社资料 (Materials of Chuangzao society) (東京: アジア出版, 1979), Vol. 6, 245.

⁵⁹ Guo Moruo, "Wei meidi furi xiang aiguo qiaobao huyu" (To the overseas patriotic compatriots about American imperialists supporting the Japanese), in *Yingjie xin Zhongguo* (Welcome New China), (Shanghai: Fudan xuebao, 1979), 53.

Critics have pointed out that Guo in fact radically reinvented and reinterpreted Confucian thoughts in order to fit into the Marxist framework.⁶⁰ Yet in so doing, what he was trying to accomplish was to insert Marxism into China and legitimize it through Confucian doctrine. Confucianism, to him, rather than the feudal thought ossified in history, but was a sort of spirit, a way of thinking, one that called for great morality and responsibility for the benefit of the people, which was completely compatible with Marxism and Communism. The historical continuity he created, which on the surface diverted from the historical periodization in terms of materialist conditions, in effect manifested the universal historical thinking transcending specific time and space. Marxism, instead of aggressively intruding in China to reveal a Western universal, was actually drawn into China by legitimizing it as the traditional way of thinking. It is the imperial-time regime that welcomed Marxism and testified to its being the orthodox ideology in modern Chinese history.⁶¹

The vision of moral agency: min-ren-renmin

To be sure, the Marxist historiography promotes the people as the ultimate subject and legitimate agency to push history forward, a vision against the historical thinking that the ultimate moral agency resides in Heaven. While historically, the sages or the sagely rulers had the responsibility to shoulder the “Mandate of Heaven,” the common people, or the petty men, *xiaoren* (小人) or *min* (民), were but the

⁶⁰ Chen Yongzhi. *Guo Moruo sixiang zhengti guan* (A view on the whole of Guo Moruo's thought) (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1992), 184.

⁶¹ Needless to say, Confucianism was constantly reinvented and reinterpreted in different social circumstances. I suggest distinguishing thought and thinking, and distinguishing the hierarchy and the Great Harmony in Confucianism. In other words, Confucianism was reinterpreted in different ways. In Mao's regime, especially during the Cultural Revolution, Confucianism was attacked for its hierarchy when class struggle was the major concern of the society. Yet when the construction of the nation rose to be the highest objective, Confucianism became the unifying force to blend with Marxism in the project of nation building.

subjects to be led by the gentlemen. *Min*, according to Xu Shen's *Shuowen jiezi* (说文解字)—one of the earliest dictionaries composed in the Han Dynasty, initially meaning “ignorant children,” later referred to those who were illiterate, unenlightened, and uninformed.⁶² Seemingly in opposition to the well-informed gentlemen, incapable of recognizing the *shi* or *Dao* (the way) of Heaven, *min* nonetheless were inextricably connected to the notion of all under Heaven (*tianxia* 天下). A ruler who desired to govern all under Heaven had to get the support from *min*. That “He who wins over the hearts of people will govern all under Heaven,” (*de minxin zhe de tianxia* 得民心者得天下) a saying evolved from *Mencius* (Mengzi, 孟子),⁶³ not only set a moral constraint for the ruler, but also placed the *min* at the heart of Heaven. Therefore, to recognize the *shi*—trend of all under Heaven was to recognize the importance of people's force. In a sense, the *shi*, inexorable as if it were coming from Heaven, resided in the very heart of the people. The moral agency of the gentlemen and the sagely rulers was thus centered on seeking the satisfaction from *min* in order to fulfill the “Mandate of Heaven.” Rather than that the social unity absolutely expressed in the “body of the despot” as Marx defined the “Oriental despotism” in terms of Asiatic mode of production,⁶⁴ the emperor unavoidably experienced a sense of dialectical

⁶² Xu Shen, *Shuowen jiezi* (说文解字). In ancient times, *min* (民) was equivalent with *meng* (萌)。“民，众萌也。萌，古本者不误。毛本作氓。非。古为民曰萌。。。萌，犹懵懵无知儿也。”

Annotated by Duan Yucai.

Refer to <http://www.gg-art.com/imgbook/index.php?bookid=53&columns=&stroke=5>

⁶³ Mencius, Li Lou 1 (离娄上). “桀纣之失天下也，失其民也；失其民者，失其心也。得天下有道：得其民，斯得天下矣；得其民有道：得其心，斯得民矣；得其心有道：所欲与之聚之，所恶勿施尔也。”

Mencius said, “Jie and Zhou's losing the throne, arose from their losing the people (*min*), and to lose the people means to lose their hearts. There is a way to get *tianxia* (all under Heaven): get the people, and *tianxia* is got. There is a way to get the people: get their hearts, and the people are got. There is a way to get their hearts: it is simply to collect for them what they like, and not to lay on them what they dislike.” Refer to *The Works of Mencius*, trans. James Legge, in *The Chinese Classics*, vol 2, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 299-300. Note that Legge translated “*Tianxia*” as “kingdom,” I believe that “all under Heaven” is better.

⁶⁴ Karl Marx. *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 472-3. Marx wrote: “In most of the Asiatic land-forms, the *comprehensive unity* standing above all these little communities appears as the higher proprietor or as the sole proprietor...the relation of the individual to the *natural*

reversal that involves “a painful ‘decentering’ of the consciousness of the individual subject,” to borrow Fredric Jameson’s words, “whom it confronts with a determination (whether of the Freudian or the political unconscious) that must necessarily be felt as extrinsic or external to conscious experience.”⁶⁵

The interdependence between the rulership and the people, though attacked for its hierarchy and suffocation of individuality in the May Fourth period, nevertheless implies a sense of metastable collective, unconscious acceptance to take on the moral agency to push history forward. In fact, this unconscious collectivism never ceases to manifest its deterministic or fatalistic power over the individual’s fate. During the May Fourth movement, although the iconoclastic intellectuals articulated their enthusiasm and determination to free the individual from feudal institutions, the attempt to recover the free-loving, humanitarian, individualistic society proved to be no more than a bankrupt endeavor. The call for *ren* (人, human), as against *min* (people), was aimed to draw out the consciousness of individualism in order to enlighten the whole nation. However, falling between the extreme poles of absolute freedom and ultimate fatalism, the individuals found themselves incapable of achieving the freedom. As Sabina Knight effectively demonstrates, the limited, if not futile, moral agency exhibited in individual subjects and the constant surrender to fatalism and historical circumstances in modern narratives imply the undying influence of the traditional way of thinking.⁶⁶

In this light, a socialist collectivism seems to respond to a collective unconscious in historical thinking. The construction of a collective subjectivity, *renmin* (the People, 人民), in contrast both to *ren* in terms of individualism and to the

conditions of labor and of reproduction...appears mediated for him through a cession by the total unity—a unity realized in the form of the despot, the father of many communities—to the individual, through the mediation of the particular commune.”

⁶⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 283.

⁶⁶ Sabina Knight, *The Heart of Time: Moral Agency in Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction*. Harvard East Asian Monographs, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 274.

traditional notion of the unenlightened *min*, endows the people with both historical consciousness and moral agency in pushing history forward. To some extent, *renmin* is the extension of *min*. While *min* composes the majority of *tianxia* (all under Heaven) and embodies the *shi* of all under Heaven, *renmin* exhibits a similar sense of universalism in that it represents all the (working) people in the world. *Renmin*, the people, not only signifies the working people, workers and peasants alike (including intellectuals), in China, but also includes the working class internationally. As Levenson observed, the notion of *renmin* manifested a sense of cultural cosmopolitanism, bearing both nationalism and internationalism for its class based ideological cause.⁶⁷

Indeed, the Chinese notion of *renmin* as the ultimate historical force seems to fall back on the ethical/spiritual track in the traditional way of thinking, rather than being based on the Marxist definition of a social class determined by the material condition. *Renmin*, the *effect* of an abstract ideological construction, during the Chinese praxis of revolution, first and foremost manifested itself as the theoretically legitimate force in building the superstructure rather than the infrastructure. As Mao Zedong articulated it in his famous philosophical work “Maodun Lun” (On Contradiction), the relationship between the infrastructure and the superstructure is one that is dialectical and interdependent, and the determinant position between them is interchangeable. Normally the infrastructure, the economic condition and the force of production alike, determines the superstructure, yet sometimes, in certain conditions, the superstructure, such as theories, the relation of production, determines the infrastructure.⁶⁸ The people’s interests and the relations among them, thus, not only

⁶⁷ Joseph Levenson, *Revolution and Cosmopolitanism* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1971), 7-8.

⁶⁸ Mao Zedong, “Maodun Lun” (On contradiction).

legitimate the function of the Communist Party, but sometimes determine whether the force of production is progressive or backward.

In 1946, after the nationwide civil war broke out between the GMD (the Nationalist Party) and the CCP (the Communist Party), Mao agreed to an interview with American journalist Anna Louise Strong. During the interview, he articulated the assertion that “all the reactionaries are paper tigers.” The American atomic bomb, the American-supported Nationalist army, even though they have advanced military technology and newly developed weapons, only seem frightening on the surface, Mao said, “but in the long run, the real strong power doesn’t reside in the reactionary cliques, but in the people.” “The reason is none other than that the reactionary cliques represent reaction, yet we represent progress.”⁶⁹ The judgment for “reaction” or “progress,” hence, does not lie in the level of technological development, but in ethical/spiritual superiority. The people’s strength, then, is the materialist conditioning on which the victory of the military confrontation relies. It is not that Mao dismissed the real power of the new technologies; on the contrary, he knew exactly how difficult it was to face such a powerful enemy. What is implied is the historical consciousness which transcends the immediate material conditions. “In the long run,” (as long as the people consciously pursue their justifiable cause), victory must belong to them (*renmin*).

Such a collective consciousness, not only interacts with different forces on the same battle field, but also resonates with history in time. It is more historical than Marxist materialist. Žižek observed that Mao’s philosophy contains a sense of “cosmic perspective” in that Mao not only perceived human life as instrumental to pursue the national blueprint, but also viewed the entirety of humanity as just a small part of the

⁶⁹ Mao Zedong, “He meiguo jizhe Anna-luyisi-sitelang de tanhua” (The talk with American journalist Anna Louise Strong) in *Mao Zedong xuanji* (The Selective Works of Mao Zedong), vol 4.

universe which cannot change the order of the universe as a whole.⁷⁰ When Mao declared the Chinese people's confidence to face the threat of America's atomic bomb, what underlay his confidence was the ethical-political spirit in the cosmic order:

The United States cannot annihilate the Chinese nation with its small stock of atom bombs. Even if the U.S. atom bombs were so powerful that, when dropped on China, they would make a hole right through the earth, or even blow it up, that would hardly mean anything to the universe as a whole, though it might be a major event for the solar system.⁷¹

According to Mao, humanity's self-destructive behavior will not destroy the cosmic ethics at large; or in other words, the justifiable collective moral cause will spiritually triumph over the mighty material power since in the long run, "victory belongs to the people."

This collective, "cosmic perspective" manifests the extreme understanding of the imperial-time regime: the interest of the people was abstracted in such a way that, not only *renmin* (the people) became instrumental to the national goal, but *renmin* could triumph over any immediate material conditions to realize the goal. The overemphasis on *renmin*'s force beyond the objective material constraints was most badly performed in an irrational and unrealistic way in the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s. It was as if the ideal, or structural, moral superiority, could transcend the specific material conditions and guarantee a great leap forward in history.

But soon history corrected itself. In the post-revolutionary era, Deng Xiaoping's slogan "seeking truth from facts" reveals that history cannot be transcended and again fused history with the traditional notion of *shi* (勢), the

⁷⁰ Zizek, "Mao Zedong: The Marxist Lord of Misrule." Introduction in *MAO: On Practice and Contradiction* (London & New York: Verso, 2007), 10.

⁷¹ Mao Zedong, "He meiguo jizhe Anna-luyisi-sitelang de tanhua" (The talk with American journalist Anna Louise Strong), in *Mao Zedong xuanji* (the Selective Works of Mao Zedong), vol 4.

historical force beyond individual human being's control. The people might still be the subject creating history, but on the condition that time/situation allows them to be.

If the claim for modern subjectivity and agency proves to be an incomplete, if not failed, endeavor, it nonetheless suggests that the ultimate historical agency is time. Moreover, the consciousness of time/era and its insuperable transcendence best corresponds to the imperial-time regime and its sub-regime. On the one hand, such a consciousness undermines human agency, be it individual or collective, as being limited in changing historical trends; on the other hand, nevertheless, it articulates the enduring power of the transcendent moral order which is fundamentally humanistic.

This transcendent moral order, manifested in the notion of "Tianxia" (all under Heaven), later in "the people," exhibits a sense of cosmopolitanism, a historical unconscious that resists being contained within a national boundary. Indeed, as mentioned above, the triumph of Marxism in China is no more than the *substitution* of a universalistic worldview determined by the all-encompassing imperial-time regime. Modern Chinese history, may be seen as a break from the premodern period (in terms of novel changes in social institutions, literary writing styles, technological developments, and disciplines of knowledge, etc.), yet from the perspective of historical thinking (in terms of empire and nation state), the imperial-time regime nonetheless bridges the gap between the modern and the premodern. Not only was the Marxist ideology transplanted and re-centered on Chinese soil so as to be compatible with the imperial-time regime,⁷² but traditional thinking, including Confucian and Daoist thinking, continually reappeared to accompany the modernization process. Even in the early 1970s when class struggle was the primary concern in Mao's China, Levenson already asserted that historical thinking, specifically one form that was embedded in Confucianism, refused to be placed into a museum and petrified once

⁷² For this point, I will elaborate in the next chapter.

and for all as bearing just historical significance. In fact, this form of historical thinking was still alive and managed to survive under harsh political conditions.⁷³ Had Levenson lived to witness the revival of *guoxue* (Chinese national learning) in the early 1990s and the blossoming TV representations of the Chinese Empire in the late 1990s that rearticulate the notion of “Tianxia” (all under Heaven), he might ponder his earlier statement about Western thought *displacing* Chinese thought.

Indeed, the transcendent imperial-time regime, be it conscious or unconscious, embodied in forms of Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, New Confucianism,⁷⁴ or Marxism, has always remained above and beyond social conditions in various historical periods, including modern times. The normalization of unification and moralization of time, most explicitly manifested in literary representations, draws the modern Chinese history back to its imperial origin, to time, always returning yet always progressing. The myth of Chinese Empire, told and retold throughout history, instead of being ossified in textbooks, nonetheless continually manifests its performative ability to pull the modern nation state into its self-construction and self-perpetuation. History, in this regard, echoing Gilles Deleuze’s conception of a complexity system, is the master of itself, a closed set that folds within it the totality of certain social relations, yet meanwhile opens to time awaiting the qualitative change of those relations.⁷⁵ And the change, according to Deleuze, is none other than the “eternal return” with metamorphosis. “The eternal return does not bring back ‘the same,’” Deleuze wrote, “but returning constitutes the only Same of that which becomes.

⁷³ Joseph Levenson, *Revolution and Cosmopolitanism*.

⁷⁴ It is not my intention to distinguish these Confucian schools. Yet their evolving and differentiated existence demonstrates the resilient ability of Confucianism to survive different historical periods and social conditions, which from another angle explains the undying traditional way of thinking, rather than thought.

⁷⁵ Deleuze used to interpret Bergson’s notion of *duree* in terms of closed sets and open whole. For Deleuze, the open Whole manifests duration as universal vibration and flow (in the temporal realm), and the isolable sets within the Whole exhibit the characteristics of commonsense space and time (in the spatial realm). See Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema I: The Movement Image*, 20-22.

Returning is the becoming-identical of becoming itself.” “Only the extreme, the excessive, returns; that which passes into something else and becomes identical.”⁷⁶ The extreme, the excessive, in this regard, is the imperial-time regime, the virtual Whole that links to the impossible actualizations of the Empire along history,⁷⁷ the transcendent regime that continually points to the Chinese Empire that is still becoming.

⁷⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Repetition and Difference*, trans. Paul Patton, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 41.

⁷⁷ I perceive the “imperial-time regime” as a virtual Whole in relation to the different actualizations (manifestations) of it in different time periods. For Deleuze, the relation between the virtual and the actual registers in time, and the virtual can only be conceived by actualization in space. Along the shifting processes of actualization, the virtual would also change, in a process of becoming, yet remaining as a Whole in relation to the singular actualizations. About this discussion, refer to Michael Goddard’s discussion on fold and monadic point of view. Each monad is absolutely singular and could not be encompassed in any over-arching point of view. Therefore, the monadic points of view cannot be incorporated in a higher unity in the actual sense. Only in relation to a virtual whole could the impossible monadic points of view be actualized. See Michael Goddard, “The Fold, Cinema and Neo-Baroque Modernity,” in *Impacts of Modernities (Traces 3)*, eds. Thomas Lamarre and Kang Nae-hui, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 218-9.

PART II

Between Empire and Nation State: the Symptomatic and the Paradigmatic

We speak of processes rather than practices because, although processes are made up of the activities of individual and collective social agents, they operate across extended time-scales, and seem at times to work on their own, in performing the work of social transformation.

-----Stuart Hall, *The Formations of Modernity*

Modern Chinese literature, might be seen as a discursive practice involved in the ongoing formation of modernity, which embraces the formation of the modern subject and a modern nation state.⁷⁸ As the literary critic Li Zehou pointed out, modern Chinese literature (1917-1949)⁷⁹ could be characterized as double practices—both parallel and alternating—of enlightenment and national salvation.⁸⁰ Although this statement was questioned for its highly reductionist orientation,⁸¹ what is at stake is that ideas about and ideals of subject formation and modern nation building were central to the literary experience. Under the rubric of continuing modernization, subject formation indicates the discursive construction of individual subjectivity and collective subjectivity, which could be traced in the transformation of terminology: from “min” (mass, or people) to “ren” (human, or individual), then to “renmin” (the People), the transformation that plays out the changing relations between social

⁷⁸ It is not my intention to define “modernity” or “modern nation state,” which is beyond the scope of this study. I only use the terms loosely for their conceptual values.

⁷⁹ Scholars on mainland China usually take 1917 (the eve of the May Fourth Movement) as the starting point of modern Chinese literature, and 1949 (the founding of the People’s Republic) as the endpoint. After 1949, it is considered as contemporary literature. I would take both the “modern” and the “contemporary” as “the modern period,” and, as many scholars in Chinese studies suggest, include the late Qing transitional period in the modern.

⁸⁰ Li Zehou, “Qimeng yu jiuwang de shuangchong bianzou” (the doubling practices of enlightenment and national salvation), in *Zou xiang weilai* (走向未来 Toward the future) (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, v1, 1986).

⁸¹ Cheng Guangwei, ed., *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shi* (Modern Chinese literary history). (Beijing: China Remin University Press, 2000). He suggests that the enlightenment movements and national salvation create the tension under the rubric of modernization, yet not the only tension during modernization process. 4.

structure and human agency;⁸² the project of nation building, on the other hand, brings forth the tension between the traditional empire and the modern nation state, the tension that continually comes to terms with and destabilizes the conceptual model of the modern nation state.

In both processes of subject formation and nation building, modernity appears to be a theoretical guideline that continually negotiates with the discursive developments over time. Modernity, according to Stuart Hall in his *Formations of Modernity* in the epigraph above, refers to multifaceted processes in which hybridity and heterogeneity are intrinsic characteristics of this conceptual model. To characterize it as “formations” rather than “practices,” then, privileges the temporal dimension over the spatial dimension during the process of modernization, privileges structural change over emergent social phenomena, and finally, privileges the paradigmatic over the symptomatic. “Formations,” he states, “then, in our title refers to *both* the activities of emergence, and their outcomes or results: both process and structure.” (Italic in the original text.)⁸³

In fact, the term “formation,” in its emphasis on temporal process [although form/ation is fundamentally a spatial concept], refers to both the Foucauldian discursive field (in which multiple social forces work together to construct temporary spatial relations)⁸⁴ and the Deleuzian complexity field (in which temporal relations take over and history manifests its own pattern).⁸⁵ Deleuze suggests that history

⁸² I have discussed this transformation in the previous chapter.

⁸³ Stuart Hall, Introduction of *The Formations of Modernity*, eds. Stuart Hall & Bram Gieben, (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd & the Open University, 1992), 7.

⁸⁴ Although Foucault also emphasizes the temporal process of a social structure formed by different discourses, he mostly takes it as a universal historical model to construct one paradigm, rather than cross paradigms. So basically his model privileges spatial relationship over temporal relationship.

⁸⁵ Deleuze’s “Complexity theory” primarily appears in his *A Thousand Plateaus*, and his conception of time can be found in *Repetition and Difference*, *Cinema 2—the Time Image*, etc. For Deleuze, time is the ultimate subjectivity. It is that we live in time, not the other way around. The “complexity theory” suggests that the intrinsic paradox between structure and agency can be perceived in time. There are two parallel processes involved in this complexity field: one is the structural axis (power structure, domination, hierarchy, war machine, etc.), the other is the ethical axis, which is the life-affirming

develops itself along two paralleled axes: one is structural, in his term “stratification,” which means that the signifying regime determines hierarchy, domination, war machine, etc; the other is ethical, which is the life-affirming or life-destroying process. Inextricably intertwined and locked, these two axes over time will inevitably reach some “threshold” that generates “bifurcations.” A non-dialectical and open system, as it is described, this political-ethical evaluation in historical development nonetheless best annotates ancient Chinese history, revealing its cyclical pattern through a unifying moral regime. However, in the Chinese context, the interplay between the ethical and the political manifests a pattern that is not so much parallel or dialectical; rather, the ethical transcends and organizes the political. The normalization of unification and moralization of time transcend time and space, independent of specific historical situations. It is an imperial-time regime that not only proceeds along the political structural change, but is itself an all-encompassing paradigm transcending symptomatic social phenomena. It is in this sense that I propose to take modern Chinese history as an ongoing process of formation, under the rubric of modernization, in which discursive forces bring about different social symptoms and developments, yet history still manifests its own pattern, one that is moral and imperial.

In this part, I am going to focus on the tension between traditional empire and the modern nation state manifested in historical narratives during 1900-1980. From the literary narratives emerged the unsettling negotiations between the transcendent imperial-time regime and the contingent desires to represent the present. In this regard, modern Chinese history in these representations, appeared as a process of *grounding*, an enduring process to ground China in time and space. The discursive representations

assemblage. I borrow the term “complexity field” to stress the ethical dimension of historical development, which is most obvious in Chinese history. For an introduction of the “Complexity theory,” refer to Mark Bonta & John Protevi, *Deleuze and Geophilosophy—A Guide and Glossary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

of China on the one hand manifest the spatial relations symptomatic of social reality; on the other hand, however, temporally speaking, they carry the paradigmatic historical unconscious resistant to being confined in the representation.

Representation, history, time, and agency

In fact, at times of profound social turmoil and disorientation, literature appeared as a discursive practice of both *representing* and *defining* reality. On the one hand, it is part of the popular culture responsive to the contingent social demands; on the other hand, however, it also continues the traditional function of literature—as a subjective medium carrying the Way (*Wen yi zai Dao* 文以載道)—helping construct the “nation,” the “individual,” and “the people.” To describe it in a schematic way, it is both symptomatic and paradigmatic. Whereas the symptomatic function of literature manifests the discursive practice in different social circumstances, the paradigmatic function nevertheless reveals the moralistic, universalistic orientation in both literary practice and nation formation. In other words, out of the yearning for defining “the time and space” in order to situate and construct China in the world order, literature at once serves as the *representation* and *agency* to spatialize temporality, to delineate social relations, and to characterize the disquieting national-global interactions. As Prasenjit Duara pointed out, the acceptance of the discourses of the nation and linear history in general is “a complex project of repressions and recreations.”⁸⁶ Literature, as a legitimating practice, suppresses as it expresses, it destroys as it constructs, and it asserts its own social function yet at the same time acknowledges its inadequacy.

In his influential essay “DissemiNation,” Homi Bhabha proposed an apprehension of the “double and split” time of national representation to challenge the

⁸⁶ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 33.

homogeneous and horizontal view normally associated with the representation.⁸⁷ He stated that “in the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*.”⁸⁸

The “ambivalence of writing the nation,” the intrinsic paradox of “repressions and recreations” in literary practice, hence, gives prominence to the double claim of representation. On the one hand, as representation, literary work, be it theory or creative writing, denies itself as reality; on the other hand, however, in asserting its own lack of reality, literary representation claims that the world it represents must be original, complete, and real.⁸⁹ To grasp the real, social thinkers and literary critics took pains to come to terms with the past and the present, borrowing or inventing words, to *name* the Chinese society, to *label* the social relations within and without, and to *typify* the exemplary characters in creative writings. The slippery and reductionist *naming* and *typifying* practice, though at times being canonized in the discursive field, is always subject to *renaming* over a longer period of time. Put otherwise, the upsetting double structure of representation, the paradox between agency and representation, not only reveals the gap among different representations in the same historical time in portraying reality, but also determines the continuous *representations* of the same reality along time. As a result, the human agency, the authorial voice, in any representation, will be accompanied with a shadow of self-doubt, hesitation, and instability manifested through time. In one sense, there might be gaps between the author’s intention and his writing; in another sense, the author, or a group of authors

⁸⁷ Homi Bhabha, “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and margins of the modern nation,” in Homi Bhabha ed. *Nation and Narration* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), 295.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 297.

⁸⁹ Timothy Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity,” in Timothy Mitchell, ed. *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 18.

may not be consistent over time. (For instance, a critic at age forty might negate what he wrote at twenty).

In this light, the metaphoric scene from psychoanalysis might be helpful to understand the discursive formation of modern Chinese literature and history. Donald Spence observes that during the psychoanalytic treatment, there is always a gap between the narrative truth and the historical truth in that the psychoanalyst has to piece together the imagined historical truth from the patient's fragmentary narrative.⁹⁰ The process of finding the "truth," which is more often than not related to the primal scene that has been suppressed in narrative, demands time. It is through time that the psychoanalyst could "de-translate" and "re-translate," to use Laplanche's term, the patient's narrative to find out the historical truth. Insofar as the "sick man" or the "madman" was the popular image of Chinese in the literature of the early republican period, perhaps, their representations of China are just the patient's narratives, through which, and only through which, the historical truth, the truth that links to the (imagined) origin, could be elicited through time.

Perhaps, here, we encounter the theoretical obstacle in dealing with history, agency, and psychoanalysis. It is commonsense that history and psychoanalysis are two seemingly universal yet contradictory fields. Both are centered on seeking origin and truth, they nevertheless diverge in the vision of agency, which in effect articulates the fundamental tension between the two competitive models of modern thinking traced back to Marx and Freud. Marx's historical perspective of linear progression presupposes human subjectivity and his historicity, regarding historical determinism as the universal principle. On the other hand, psychoanalysis assumes psychical process as a timeless universal model regardless of any historical trend. These two

⁹⁰ Donald P. Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982).

seemingly incompatible theories have both been criticized as too formalist and totalizing, and each one criticized the other according to his own principle. In fact, where they diverge is also where they intersect: the vision of time, time's relation with space, and the function of human agency. For Marx, time could be reduced to history and therefore is always localized and actualized in space, the temporal-spatial representation consequently manifests its very historicity. Human subjectivity, social and collective, is what pushes the wheel of history forward. Freud takes the same assumption of time in relation to space. However, for Freud, history, or truth, is not completely representable. The unconscious is outside time, non-locatable in representation, and thus outside history.⁹¹ The human subject, the individual rather than the social formation, is intrinsically split, with no way to form a homogeneous subjectivity. Distinct as such, the two theories nevertheless reach a common intersection—time and its representation. The question becomes whether time could be freed from history, or whether the unconscious could be accounted for, or how to characterize the relationship between time and human subjectivity. Such a question, or a set of questions, has been encouraging the deconstructive or poststructuralist philosophers to link these two principles together, to elaborate the ambiguous relationship between time and history, between time and space.⁹² However, the fundamental tension between history and psychoanalysis remains unresolved.

As much as I was inspired by Foucault and Deleuze for their discussions on history and subjectivity, I found that they also diverge in the treatment of time and psychoanalysis. As a historian, Foucault is known for his radical historicizing of

⁹¹ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 37.

⁹² For the discussions on time and history, refer to Lyotard, *The Inhuman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988); Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004) ; Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Gilles Deleuze's cinema books.

psychoanalysis. In the field of history, insofar as history could only be approached through representation, time is inevitably subordinated to space as a homogeneous measure to record movement and events. Therefore, the attempt to historicize social events determines that the historians privilege space over time, privilege the social over the individual, and privilege the effect over the cause. Inasmuch as the unconscious is unrepresentable, history appears to be the *result* of the conscious negotiations among different social forces. Unlike Marx, Foucault focuses more on the individual subject rather than the collective subject. The individual is the product of the discursive power constructions—normalization of knowledge and disciplinization of the body, for example⁹³—and the active agency could only manifest itself in the subversive performativity. As described in the *History of Sexuality*, talking and confession of forbidden sexual conduct actually proves to be a subversive force against the dominant power.⁹⁴ However, for Foucault, power domination and performative subversion are both in themselves homogeneous, even though they operate in the opposite directions. In other words, the collective subject (power domination) and the individual subject (performative subversion) are both homogeneous, defined by their positionality in the web of the power formation. In this sense, history appears to be the discursive, discrete representations of social events, and there is no intrinsic, continuous cause for the transformation of the same subject along time.

On the other hand, Deleuze takes a more welcoming attitude toward psychoanalysis. More significantly, he frees time from history and representation. Inspired by Bergson, whose notion of “duration” takes time as a central concern and links psychoanalysis with the issue of subjectivity, Deleuze is able to regard history as

⁹³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

⁹⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

a continuous yet qualitatively changing process. For Deleuze, instead of being a homogeneous measure to record movement, time is heterogeneous, continuous with multiple directions, and is the ultimate subjectivity of history.

Indeed, when time is taken out of representation and remains as an automatic determinant, it envelops both history and psychoanalysis, in an epistemologically novel way. Since both history and psychoanalysis have been submitting time to space, to representation, there is no common ground to account for the unconscious and subjectivity. Freud, later Lacan, for instance, deals with a subjectivity based on loss and lack, which is unrepresentable and therefore outside of history. While Freud is concerned more with the traces of memory and their discontinuous interaction with consciousness, the construction of subjectivity falls into a paradoxical relationship with time. In one sense, subjectivity depends on the unconscious, which is timeless; in another sense, it also depends on consciousness, which is incompatible, or “impossible,” with the unconscious yet is linked to time or temporality. Although Freud employs a spatial model—the writing pad—to describe the formation of subjectivity, it is not clear whether the subject is in time or time is in the subject.⁹⁵

If for Freud, time is merely a by-product of the psychic process, for Bergson, time nonetheless plays a crucial role in the delineation of subjectivity. It is through Bergson that time starts to manifest its heterogeneous nature independent of space, hence enfold the splitting subjectivity. Bergson introduces a notion of duration to describe the continuous, dynamic, and interpenetrating relations between past and present. In effect, the concept of duration signifies the interdependence and the continuum between the binaries of past and present in a multifaceted double structure: time vs. matter; memory vs. perception; difference in kind vs. difference in degree;

⁹⁵ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 37.

qualitative vs. quantitative; virtual vs. actual; temporal vs. spatial, et cetera.⁹⁶ The coexistence and interchange between these binary aspects, on the one hand, frees time from spatial representation, manifesting its splitting nature between past and present; on the other hand, reconfigures time into spatial categories, indicating the interaction between inside and outside. For Bergson, duration does not refer to psychological introspection, but rather, it is the continuous negotiations between body and mind, and between mind and nature.⁹⁷ Consequently, there is no clear-cut boundary between the inside and the outside, since we are simultaneously experiencing time inside psychologically and moving in it as an outside medium. Just as perception takes us outside ourselves to where an object is in space, memory places us in the realm of the past in duration. The movement between the inside and outside is thus no less outside us than in us, “and the self itself in turn is only one case among others.”⁹⁸ Time and subjectivity are therefore inseparably bound up in continuous movement and negotiation, or in Deleuze’s term, in the process of becoming.

In light of Bergson’s thought on duration, yet disagreeing with the model of reconfiguring time into space, Deleuze conceives time as the ultimate subject that is independent of space and outside us. For Deleuze, time is crystalline in nature: it at once contains the past that is preserved and the present that is passing. The past is registered in the realm of the virtual, and the present is registered in the realm of the actual. All the pasts have been contracted into present, each of which remains a totality of the past, and each of which constructs a singular circuit with the present. All the virtual-actual circuits interact with each other and negotiate with each other,

⁹⁶ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul & W. Scott Palmer (Mineola & New York: Dover Publications, 2004).

⁹⁷ David. N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997), 127.

⁹⁸ Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 75.

ultimately drawing the subject into their non-localizable temporal realm.⁹⁹ In this respect, the Bergsonian interiorization of time merely grasps the actual aspect of time, namely, to sink the past into memory and the present into perception, which means, the interior time still registers in the spatial realm, while the real virtuality of time, the crystalline nature of time, the differentiating power of time, still remains outside. In Deleuze's words:

The only subjectivity is time, non-chronological time grasped in its foundation, and it is we who are internal to time, not the other way round.... Time is not the interior in us, but just the opposite, the interiority in which we are, in which we move, live, and change. Subjectivity is never ours, it is time, that is, the soul or the spirit, the virtual. The actual is always objective, but the virtual is subjective: it was initially the affect, that which we experience in time, then time itself, pure virtuality which divides itself in two as affector and affected, 'the affection of self by self' as definition of time.¹⁰⁰

This understanding of subjectivity of/in time is fundamentally different from that manifested in history. It questions the legitimacy of history in representation and calls for a new mode of thinking. It takes history as a continuous process, discursive in actuality yet unknowingly determined in virtuality. History is the history of becoming. In other words, the represented history is the discrete history recorded in events, the after *effect* of time being actualized in space, while the real *cause* of history, the virtuality of time, cannot be grasped in space, but can only manifest itself in time, in the process of becoming.

In this sense, human agency is no more than the splitting manifestation of time, whose continuous transformation could only be perceived in a longer period of time. That means, in representation, human agency appears discursive, discontinuous, and subject to contingent spatial relations. Yet the real virtuality is determinant, continuous,

⁹⁹ Deleuze, *Repetition and Difference*.

¹⁰⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 82-3.

and paradigmatic over time. It is in this light that I put modern Chinese history in both the symptomatic and paradigmatic frameworks, and examine literature—as the discursive agency in subject formation and nation building—in a more transcendent, historically determined way.

Hence, in any specific historical moment, there is a tendency in representation of the spatial over the temporal, of the modern over the traditional; nevertheless, over time, the universalistic and moralistic character in representation exhibits the pattern of Chinese history. During the predominant process of modernization (including enlightenment and national salvation movements), literature and literary critics were caught up in a discursive field of signification, both constructing and being constructed, while the gap between their subjective position and the objective world registers in time, through which the imperial-time regime manifests its penetrating power.

In this part I intend to analyze the historical plays/novels in the modern period to discuss the unsettling negotiations between history and the making of history for the purpose of the present. In other words, my focus is not only how history is imagined and constructed through literary representation, but also how history conditions and shapes the representation. Whereas the modern “nation state” as a referential category dominates the discourse of nation building, it is but the *effect* of representation visible in the discursive process of linguist construction.¹⁰¹ The fact that the unity-prone, morality-based portrayal occupies historical representations implies that the historical empire refused to be confined within the frame of a modern nation state and continued registering its surplus value in time. In this light, the historical narratives not only

¹⁰¹ Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice*. Liu suggests that when Western terms “travel” to China, they are unavoidably reformed or reinvented to fit into the Chinese context during the process of translation. In this sense, the Chinese term “guojia” bears a different connotation from the “nation state.”

mirror the social relations in different historical stages, but also present the ceaseless *staging* of the Chinese Empire.

Lest my readings on historical narratives espouse ahistorical universality entailing facile generalization and whitewashing the complexity of specific historical circumstances, a brief discussion on intellectual characterization of time and space in modern times seems to be necessary. Without denying the intellectual creative agency in defining China and finding the national cure, I am more interested in the gap and discrepancy in their novel inventions along time. My interest also lies in the ambivalent moral agency, one that intellectuals adopted yet at once paralyzed by subjecting themselves to a larger historical trend. To some extent, the ambivalence registers in the tension between tradition and modernization, which set in motion the inextricable involvement of tradition in both enlightenment and national salvation movements. It is the wildly-discussed “tension between nationalism and iconoclasm.”¹⁰² Whereas nationalism requires a construction of benign history for a sense of shared community, iconoclasm depicts the core of that tradition as a malignant tumor demanding immediate elimination. The inextricably intertwined contradiction between nationalism and iconoclasm therefore not only determines the heterogeneity and complexity in Chinese modernization, but also undermines the absolute agency of intellectuals in their treatment of tradition. Cultural revolution in China, in Kirk Denton’s language, “has in practice seemed to restore the traditional more than it has succeeded in destroying it.”¹⁰³ The treatment of history or tradition, hence, not only reveals the intellectual ambivalence that spills over the confinement of nation building discourse, but also conceals it as the theoretical residue only inhabited in a subconscious, historical level.

¹⁰² Kirk Denton, ed. *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), General Introduction, 7.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 11.

Between the traditional empire and the national empires: spacing the temporal interval

From the late Qing on, the collapse of the “China-centered” worldview—which tended to universalize Chinese time (in terms of the cyclical, dynastic calendar)—and the urge to localize global time associated with Western imperialism (including Japan) engendered the problematic of formulating the present. The consciousness of time for the intellectuals challenged the centuries-long moral principle in confrontation with the imperialist aggression. In fact, as scholars have demonstrated, Chinese nationalism arose as a response to Western imperialism, which went hand in hand with iconoclasm. It at once advocated the negation of the past rooted in the moral, cultural system and promoted the idea of a modern nation based on notions of domestic wealth and power.¹⁰⁴ However, as Prasenjit Duara has shown, the challenge merely roused intellectuals as subjective agency to modernize and build the nation out of the traditional empire, in a fashion that is completely compatible with the traditional morality in that the agency is still moral.¹⁰⁵ Though Yan Fu’s translation of Huxley’s social Darwinism and the later enlightenment movement confirmed linear, teleological, and progressive historical development,¹⁰⁶ past moral

¹⁰⁴ Joseph Levenson and Theodore Hutters both suggest that Chinese nationalism grew as the response of Western impact. Levenson argues that modern nationalism negates the traditional “culturalism,” in which unity was derived from a set of cultural values embodied in sacred texts explicated by an intellectual elite, modern nationalism provides an alternative basis for unity. Hutters also holds the idea that modernity in China includes both the need to reject the past and the idea of national salvation from imperialism. Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965). Theodore Hutters, “Ideology of Realism in Modern China: the Hard Imperatives of Imported Theory” in Liu Kang and Xiaobing Tang, eds. *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China: Theoretical Interventions and Cultural Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 147-74.

¹⁰⁵ Prasenjit Duara, “De-constructing the Chinese Nation.” In *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 30, (July, 1993): 1-26.

¹⁰⁶ Yan Fu, *Tianyan Lun*. Translation of Thomas Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*. Scholars have recently demonstrated that Darwin’s evolutionary theory demonstrates more than linear development. Yet in the past, it was received as the scientific portrayal of linear development, in both China and the West. Here, I still adopt the past interpretation of this theory.

principles were still alive and were regarded as the primary factor in pushing history forward.

The consciousness of time was best manifested in Liang Qichao's poem *The Song of the Twentieth Century Pacific* written during his travel over the Pacific on Jan. 1st, 1900:¹⁰⁷

All of a sudden I wonder when and where it is now
It is the threshold of the new and the old centuries
In the middle of the East and West hemispheres
Neither prior to nor after, I am
At the spot of the most crucial position in the world
.....
The trend has come that only the competitive survives
Either good or bad; either rise or fall
There must be a hole first before the mercury could penetrate into the
ground
There is no place for the worm to hide if something does not decay
from within
.....
We have 450 million compatriots
How could we passively wait for defeat?
.....

In the poem he adopted a panoramic view describing thousands of years of world history, placing China in the increasingly connected global system. However, ironically, along with the ready acceptance of global time, he situated himself in the center of the world. As the product of the encounter between empires, Liang emerged as an omniscient subject engaging himself in the project of re-centering China in the world. For Liang, even though he accepted the doctrine of social Darwinism, he believed that the fall of the country must start from the erosion from within. To carry out the project of building a new nation, the intellectuals should lead the mass to

¹⁰⁷ Liang Qichao, "Ershi shiji Taipingyang ge" (The Song of the twentieth century Pacific). In *Liang Qichao quanji* (The complete collection of Liang Qichao's works) (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1999), vol. 9, 5426-7.

construct a “young China,” as opposed to the “old empire.”¹⁰⁸ The “old” and the “young”/or “new” were not two exclusive entities as in a creation process, but appeared as a temporal renewal or inversion between them. For instance, in the widely cited literary piece *Shaonian Zhongguo shuo* (On the Young China), Liang suggested that the old empire and the young state were in fact the two sides of one coin, depending on how you perceive it. In his flowery language:

The Japanese are used to calling our China the old empire, over and over again. They might get this idea from the Westerners. Alas! Is China indeed old? Liang Qichao says: Oh, what kind of understanding is this! What kind of understanding is this! I have a young China in my heart.¹⁰⁹

Then he went on to list examples of greatness since ancient times, for instance, the great emperors like Qin Shihuang and Han Wudi, the great literature inherited from the Han and Tang dynasties, and the great martial achievements during Kangxi and Qianlong’s reigns in the Qing Dynasty, to emphasize that there was this creative, progressive, and youthful energy inside China throughout history. From the perspective of this youthful creativity that is inside the Chinese Empire, China is young and hopeful. To call for the new, then, does not mean to discard the whole established regime, but to accentuate the new inside the old, to discover the interiority of the national essence through an inversion of perspective. For him, the new grows out of the old. It is the long, glorious history that demonstrates and nurtures the pride and confidence of the young China.

¹⁰⁸ Liang Qichao, “Lun xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhi guanxi” (On the relationship between fiction and the government of the people) and “Shaonian Zhongguo shuo” (On the young China), in *Liang Qichao shiwen xuanzhu* (Selected poetry and prose of Liang Qichao), edited and annotated by Wang Quchang. (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1987), 244-63.

¹⁰⁹ Liang Qichao, “Shaonian Zhongguo Shuo”. See Wang Quchang, ed. *Liang Qichao shiwen xuanzhu* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1987), 175.

Favorite disciple of the Confucian scholar Kang Youwei, Liang in his earlier age shared a worldview similar to his master's. Kang, in his philosophical works, sought to revive Confucianism by radically reinterpreting some of its canonical works and portraying Confucius, who was conventionally glorified as the “uncrowned King” longing to restore the ideal rule of the ancient sage-kings, as a progressive, utopian reformer.¹¹⁰ What was latent in Kang's thought was the triumph of a historical consciousness that favored progression and the future over the past. It was a consciousness that nonetheless placed the imperial moral system in a transcendent, all-encompassing level. Confucius and Confucianism, albeit reinvented and reformed, survived time and space and still shaped the modern social order.

The mix of progression and traditional morality, ineluctably locked in tension between the West and China, in effect manifests not so much the victory of the Western ideal as the appropriation of the West into the Chinese historical consciousness. In 1903, Liang Qichao published an incomplete novel *Xin Zhongguo weilai ji* (the New China's future) to carry out his political blueprint. Full of lengthy speeches and debates in promoting his political ideal, it is hardly a novel in the literary sense. Yet it provides a good source to perceive Liang's vision of time and history. The novel begins in a retrospective fashion. The narrator opens the story in a way as in a historical *yanyi*, only to set the narrative time in the future:¹¹¹ “Let's say it is the year 1962 in the Western calendar,¹¹² 2513 years after Confucius was born. It is the first day of the *renyin* year (Chinese lunar calendar), and we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the political reform.” Then he continues to depict the prosperity of

¹¹⁰ Kang Youwei, *Xinxue weijing kao* (1891), *Kongzi gaizhi kao* (1897) and *Datong shu*, are important examples in this regard. These works are his intellectual basis for a utopian nation built upon parliamentary democracy.

¹¹¹ Liang Qichao, *Xinzhongguo weilaiji* (The future of new China), in A Ying, *Wanqing wenxue congchao* (The collection of late Qing literature) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), vol 1.

¹¹² In the original novel, it is the year of 2062. I think he miscalculated the year.

China at that time after the success of the reform. Since a world peace conference and China's historical exposition are being held in Nanjing and Shanghai, China becomes the central place to draw worldwide attention. Political leaders of powerful countries are coming to congratulate China on its accomplishment, and the Chinese universities are full of foreign students from overseas. Following this exciting portrayal of China's present (future), the protagonist, or the diegetic narrator Kong Juemin, a prominent scholar who is the descendent of Confucius, starts to make a speech, reflecting on the difficult years at the beginning of the reform 60 years before (the contemporary time of Liang's novel). In Kong's understanding, the fundamental factors that determine the success of a nation reside in the people's virtue, intellect, and spirit (min de 民德, min zhi 民智, min qi 民气), among which the most crucial one is the people's virtue. Without virtue the nation is doomed to be weak and defeated.¹¹³ Let alone a utopian vision of China-centered world future, the correlation of the Confucian morality with the new nation demonstrates the pre-occupation with imperial-moral vision speaking through Liang's nation building project. Although he embraced social Darwinism and believed that mighty forces were determining the final outcome in the global arena, as manifested in his *Pacific* poem, he attributed the backwardness of the Qing Empire to the moral decay from within.

It is noteworthy that this novel portrays the future in the form of a historical *yanyi*, propagating an ideal political regime hitherto non-existent in China yet supported by moral justification embedded in Confucianism. The coexistence of Western time and Chinese time, as revealed in the opening sentence of the novel, symbolically exhibits China's localization of a global time, and at the same time resituates China at the center of the world. However, this promising future can only be brought to life through morality, with the moral judgment tracing back to Confucius

¹¹³ Ibid. 5-6.

and personified in Mr. Kong. In other words, the future in a sense is not built up on the present, but rather on the *absence* of the present (in terms of the lack of morality in the present), and it is the past that deems this imagined future meaningful.

However, this juxtaposition of the past and the future not only reveals that the future is conditioned by the past, but also displays an intrinsic paradox in his vision of time: on the one hand, the future is created out of the desire of the present for a better world; on the other hand, the inability to characterize the present makes the future groundless. The incorporation of the past with the future manifests the refraction of time here: whether history will develop linearly or cyclically remains unsettled. It seems for Liang, the only tangible and graspable ground for the present is (the lack of) morality, which is deeply rooted in the Confucian unifying imperial regime registered not so much in the past as in the transcendent time, and which, as in Kang Youwei's revision of Confucianism, refuses to be confined within the category of "tradition" or "modern."

The Future of New China remained unfinished, maybe because of the author's inability to characterize the present, which unfortunately invalidates his design of the future. As Liang admitted in the preface of the novel: "Both a nation and a people are organisms whose phenomena are subject to constant changes. Even Guan Zhong or Zhuge Liang could not predict what would happen in the next year, not to mention predicting fifty years later, so how could some student like me to predict it!"¹¹⁴ The yearning for a predictable future went hand in hand with the realization of its unpredictability, rendering the belief in the future problematic; at the same time, the ever-changing present makes the prediction even more groundless.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 1.

Needless to say, Liang's political ideal changed over time in his life,¹¹⁵ typical of many intellectuals in modern Chinese history, and his anxiety to grasp a tangible present and future has also been a common problem for his and later generations. Indeed, modern Chinese intellectual history, complicated as it is, could be seen as a discursive process of *grounding*—to ground China in global time and space. The linear Darwinian time meets a cyclical, transcendent moral time, only to create more refracted times, which continually direct intellectuals toward a hermeneutic return to the past.

Much has been said about Chinese intellectuals in crisis,¹¹⁶ one that, by and large, came from the frustration in trying to ground the present. However ironically, it is precisely the impossibility of grounding the present that makes the practice of grounding possible. From the late Qing period, followed by the May Fourth, a lot of theorists and multiple media, magazines and newspapers alike, devoted themselves to producing the “new literature,” “new fiction,” “new drama,” “new youth,” etc, to announce the break from the past and characterize the present. “Era” or “times” (*shidai*) became a fashion word to formulate arguments in literary debates. For instance, Zhou Zuoren suggested that “era” be the only key term and standard in judging literary works when he advocated “humane literature” in 1918.¹¹⁷ Cheng Fangwu argued that literature should shoulder the mission of the “era.”¹¹⁸ And Shen

¹¹⁵ In his early age, Liang stood with his master Kang Youwei advocating a regime of constitutional monarchy. Yet later, he changed his mind and embraced the People's Republic.

¹¹⁶ Hao Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California press, 1987); Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*; Thomas Metzger, *Escape from Predicament*.

¹¹⁷ Zhou Zuoren, “Ren de wenxue” (Humane literature). In *Xin qingnian* (New youth), Vol 5, No.6. Dec 15, 1918. Collected in Chen Shouli, ed. *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yundong shiliao zhaibian* (The selection of historical documents of modern Chinese literary movements) (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1985), vol. 1, 30-31.

¹¹⁸ Cheng Fangwu, “Xin wenxue zhi shiming” (The mission of the new literature) in *Chuangzao zhoubao* (Creation weekly), May 20, 1923. See Chen Shouli, ed. *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yundong shiliao zhaibian* (The selection of historical documents of modern Chinese literary movements), vol. 1, 68.

Yanbing (Mao Dun) emphasized that “Mr. Era” would not allow the restoration of/reversion to the past (*fu gu*) in literary movement.¹¹⁹

However, the “era” they understood was not the present they saw in China, nor the present in the modern Western world, but rather the *temporal gap* between the ideal world and China’s present. As Cheng Fangwu described it in 1923, “our era is an era governed by law of the jungle, in which mighty powers silence justice, social conscience withers, and a sense of honor is lost. It is an era that is material-seeking, cold and cruel.”¹²⁰ And it was the mission of literature to bridge this gap by calling for social conscience and curing the illness in the society. Thus, it was this desire to ground the “era” that directs the literary practice to *represent* the present and *present* the future. This future, universally individualistic and humanistic as advocated in the May Fourth movement, demanded to free the individual from the “feudal” institutions—family and the Confucian constraints—to construct the individual as a real “human,” a modern citizen. This real “human,” nonetheless, did not approve of the law of the jungle manifested in Western imperialism, but tried to live an individualistic, ethical, moral, and universally loving life in harmony within the whole of humanity (*ren lei*).¹²¹ Ironically enough, while the May Fourth intellectuals worked hard to negate tradition, what they broke with was but the hierarchy and inhumane constraints of the feudal institutions, not the universal and moralistic tendency intrinsically existing in tradition. Iconoclasm, based on an essentialized and absolutized notion of tradition as obsolete and incapable of self-regeneration,

¹¹⁹ Shen Yanbing, “Wenxuejie de fandong yundong” (The reactionary movement in literary circles) in *Wenxue* (Literature), May 12, 1924. See Chen Shouli, ed. *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yundong shiliao zhaibian* (The selection of historical documents of modern Chinese literary movements), Vol 1, 111.

¹²⁰ Cheng Fangwu, “Xin wenxue zhi shiming” (The mission of the new literature) in *Chuangzao zhoubao* (Creation weekly) May 20, 1923. See Chen Shouli, ed. *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yundong shiliao zhaibian* (The selection of historical documents of modern Chinese literary movements), Vol 1, 69.

¹²¹ Zhou Zuoren, “Rende wenxue” (Humane literature). See Chen Shouli, ed. *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yundong shiliao zhaibian* (The selection of historical documents of modern Chinese literary movements) (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1985), vol 1, 30-31.

nonetheless promoted the surplus value of tradition that is deemed timeless and transcendent. For instance, when Zhou Zuoren articulated his understanding of “human,” he referred to Mozi’s conception of all-embracing love (*Jian’ai*兼爱) as theoretical support.¹²² The attempt to embrace the universal, ideal future thus is grounded at the juncture between the Western humanistic ideal and China’s universal conception of morality in tradition. The iconoclastic enlightenment movement therefore appears to be no less a re-figuration of suppressed moral order within tradition than a wholesale Westernization movement. In fact, as demonstrated in the first chapter, it is the perceived compatibility of the Western ideal and China’s universal moral order that co-determined the way modern China developed itself. However, the embrace of a linear, progressive global time demands suppressing the cyclical, traditional time into unconsciousness, which, like the surplus value of a commodity, cannot fit into the frame of the consciousness of a modern time.

The War of Resistance to Japan (1937-1945) broke the utopian dream of modernization (Westernization), resulting in a nationalistic turn in literary practice.¹²³ Literature shifted its focus from an “individualistic, humane” literature to a “national literature,” and the construction of individual subjectivity gave way to the construction of collective subjectivity.¹²⁴ Not only did history appear as the mirror of the present national crisis on the visible stage, but tradition was also seen as the necessary site to educate and incorporate the people into the project of national defense and nation building. In his “Chinese style and Chinese manner” (*Zhongguo qipai yu zhongguo zuofeng*), a title referring to Mao Zedong’s speech, Ba Ren articulated the necessity of

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Before the War of Resistance to Japan, there was already a revolutionary turn in literary practice after the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925. For the purpose of discussing the conception of time in relation to the representation of history, I skip this period here, yet will refer to the revolutionary movement and the acceptance of Marxism in the next section.

¹²⁴ Cheng Guangwei, eds. *Zhongguo xiandai wenxueshi*. 5.

breaking away from tradition in the May Fourth period and the necessity to re-incorporate tradition into literary practice in the contemporary era. He argued that although Lu Xun opposed young people's reading traditional literature at the beginning of the May Fourth movement for the purpose of introducing new literature from the West, Lu Xun's own literary works were nonetheless nurtured by traditional Chinese style and Chinese manner. The discontinuity in form and continuity in essence in literature, then, manifested the different demands of different eras in the discursive practices of literature. Now it was time to re-articulate the Chinese style and Chinese manner, the national characteristic which includes both national essence and national form to create the people's literature and art. "The People's literature and art is the higher stage of the new Chinese literature," he wrote. "It is neither inferior to, nor regressive from, the demand of the May Fourth humanistic literature. From the May Fourth period, to the emergence of the revolutionary literature around 1927, till the development of the people's literature today, it is the negation of negation."¹²⁵ Though he described the re-appropriation of tradition in a Hegelian dialectic way, on the visible level, the underlying assumption in this statement is nevertheless the immanent presence of tradition rendered invisible sometimes in the subjective literary practice. In fact, during all this time, the historical dramas in traditional forms in the musical theater had always been popular in the entertainment horizon, albeit erased in the mainstream literary discourse.¹²⁶ In other words, tradition had always been accompanying literary movements, yet the temporal gap between the ideal and reality

¹²⁵ Ba Ren, "Zhongguo qipai yu Zhongguo zuofeng" (Chinese style and Chinese manner). In *Wenyi zhendi* (Post of literature and art), September 1, 1939. See Chen Shouli, ed. *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yundong shiliao zhaobian*, 94.

¹²⁶ Cheng Huaping, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo xiqu lilun de jindai zhuanxing* (The modern transition in theories of literature and musical theater) (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2001). Cheng argues that the revolutionary attempt to reform the traditional musical theater resulted in limited effect in practice. Since the reformers are usually not the experts in musical theater, their reform mostly remains at a theoretical level. Yet the musical theater with traditional dramas still remains as a popular form of entertainment.

renders the literary practice always in a process of becoming and grounding. The construction of the “individual,” the “nation,” and the “people,” espoused by the “negation of negation” of “tradition,” is but the *effect* of “becoming the individual,” “becoming the nation,” and “becoming the people,” while history and tradition, in the form of metamorphosis, continually speak through the process of becoming. In the later period, “socialist realism” as a mainstream almost encompassed the visible field of literary circles. However, as discussed above, the temporal interval between ideal and reality more often than not directed intellectuals to return to tradition for moral justification, which endlessly echoes the powerfully unifying and moralistic imperial-time regime.

In this sense, historical narratives in effect perform the function of “spacing the intervals” in bridging history with the present, or ideal with reality. They imply, time after time, an undiscernable ghost that haunts the representation of reality, adding an ambiguous shade to the mainstream literary discourses.

Between nation state and empire: Marxism in China

Initially lacking recognition of the internal boundaries within the empire, intellectuals were forced to draw a binary opposition between China and the West when facing Western imperialist aggression, which consequently caused confusion and ambivalence in delineating ethnic boundaries from within. Scholars have characterized the late Qing period as the transitional period of the awakening of nationalism. Two types of nationalism were discussed: one was “reactive nationalism” or “state nationalism,” which grew mainly as a reaction against imperialist aggression in China. The other was “ethnic nationalism,” which arose to express the resentment

against the domination of China by the Manchu ethnic minority.¹²⁷ Yet scholars also found out that both conceptions of nationalism, albeit useful in probing into Chinese intellectuals' minds, were insufficient as characteristic categories. Both Don Price and Hao Chang observed that the late Qing intellectuals carried some "universalistic" orientation that cannot be reduced to nationalism in either sense.¹²⁸

Indeed, Liang Qichao's *The Future of New China* might have implied universalistic surplus value beyond "state nationalism." As for "ethnic nationalism," the category itself is groundless from its very inception. In fact, the anti-Manchu sentiment manifests an intrinsic paradox that it is neither reasonable nor practical. On the one hand, to make the non-Chinese (Manchu) responsible for China's failure against the third party (Western imperialism) not only puts Manchus in a non-place within China, but also renders the understanding of "China" problematic. To put it in another way, the anti-Manchu sentiment appears not so much an anti-foreign attitude to define China as to express hatred toward the inability of and the lack of morality in the leadership within China. Sun Zhongshan's republican model of the modern state, one that shifted from "driving out barbarians (Manchus) and resurrecting China" to "the republic of five peoples," suggested this oscillation and ambivalence toward other ethnicities in the project of nation building and the final triumph in maintaining an imperial border.

If the "universalistic" orientation of nation building at any rate reveals the imperial moral order inherited from history, and the modern nation state proves no more than an analytic and theoretical category in the modern period, the embrace of

¹²⁷ Hao Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning (1890-1911)* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1987), 2.

¹²⁸ Don Price, *Russia and the Roots of the Chinese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 7-28. Hao Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning (1890-1911)* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1987), 2.

Marxist internationalism by no means appears as just a discursive accident. Timothy Mitchell demonstrates that in history, the term “internationalism” appeared *prior to* the spread of the term “nationalism,” which was coined by an anti-colonial movement. The idea of “the international” was popularized in London in 1862, when the world exhibition of that year was named the Great International Exhibition. A delegation of Parisian workers sent to the exhibition met with London trade unionists and borrowed the new word, forming the Working Men’s International Association under the leadership of Karl Marx.¹²⁹ The Word “nationalism” appeared two decades later, introduced by the Irish Nationalist party as it launched the struggle against British colonialism.¹³⁰ What is implicit in these findings is that “internationalism” appeared as a universal moral structure signifying a utopian world order, one that is prior to, and transcends, the narrowly defined “nationalism.”

It is no coincidence that the notion of “internationalism” appealed to Chinese intellectuals. The transition from late Qing intellectuals’ “universalistic” perspective to the later conceptions of an enlightened, humanistic, and socialist China manifests a significant semiotic shift in the project of nation building, one that persistently resists being confined within the boundary of a modern nation state. Contrary to Levenson’s understanding that the reason Marxism appealed to Chinese intellectuals is because Marxism, due to its Western anti-capitalist origin, fulfilled at once the Chinese desire to destroy the past (anti-feudalism) and to combat the West (anti-imperialism),¹³¹ the enduring imperial notion of unity, morality, and universality might have allowed the fundamental ground for Marxism to grow in China.

¹²⁹ Karl Marx, “Address and Provisional Rules of the Working Men’s International Association” (London, 1864), reprinted in Karl Marx, *The First International and After: Political Writings*. Vol. 3, (New York: Vintage, 1974), 73-84.

¹³⁰ Timothy Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity,” 4.

¹³¹ Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 134.

In 1918, upon the success of the socialist revolution in the Soviet Union, Li Dazhao published two articles to celebrate the victory of the working class and Bolshevism. For him, it is “the victory of humanism, the victory of pacifism, the victory of reason, the victory of democracy, the victory of socialism, the victory of Bolshevism, the victory of the red flag, the victory of the world working class, and the victory of the new tide of the twentieth century....”¹³² This exciting statement, grouping different universal ideals together, exhibited his enthusiasm toward an internationalist spirit that transcends any national boundary: “The word Bolshevism, although invented by the Russians, manifests the spirit of all the enlightened people in the world.”¹³³ In his eyes, and later leftist intellectuals’ eyes, socialism was the future trend (*chao liu*) of the world. To grasp this trend and resituate China in the global order, China had to be transformed into a socialist nation which was ideologically advanced and morally superior to the capitalist world.

Li’s particularly ecstatic response toward the October Revolution, as Maurice Meisner observed, manifests his pre-Marxian worldview and his understanding of time. His writings “were less concerned with what the millennium was to look like than with the fact that it was being created in the here and now,” Meisner wrote. “He conceived of the revolution not so much as a revolt against particular oppressors but as a great, universal and elemental force that was transforming the entire world order.”¹³⁴ This universalistic, moralizing tendency and the recognition of the historical trend in effect best annotate the imperial-time regime that penetrated into modern intellectuals’ minds and displayed itself as Marxist internationalism. Yet it seems that the Western origin of this universal continually met with resistance from Chinese intellectuals. Not

¹³² Li Dazhao, “Bolshevism de shengli” (The victory of Bolshevism) in *Xin qingnian* (New youth), Nov 15, 1918. See Chen Shouli, ed. *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yundong shiliao zhaibian*, vol. 1, 26.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (New York: Atheneum, 1979), 69.

only Marxism, but also other seemingly universal ideas from the West always encountered resistance in China. From the late Qing on, the wholesale idea of modernization, or Westernization, constantly clashed with refusal and doubt not only from the attempt to recover tradition (fu gu),¹³⁵ but also from within the group who promoted the idea of enlightenment and Westernization. In 1927, Lu Xun clearly expressed his disbelief in social Darwinist evolutionary theory. He thought that progress was always accompanied with retrogress, and his evolutionist belief finally “collapsed.”¹³⁶ In terms of the enlightenment project, he doubted that an individualistic, enlightened society would be realized in China. It seems to him that “[in China] the time when everyone could be encouraged to develop his individuality has not yet come,” and he was not sure whether such a time would come in the future.¹³⁷

The tension between the Chinese universalistic tendency and the Western origin, not only engendered doubt and resistance, but also brought forth creative invention and reinterpretation of Western ideas and ideals, as Xiaomei Chen characterized it, a sense of “Occidentalism” that bestowed on Chinese intellectuals an active agency to manipulate and appropriate the Western terms to serve the Chinese society.¹³⁸ Chen suggested that the May Fourth generation actively appropriated the Western ideals and the idea of the West as a lever from which to negotiate between the Chinese past and the future of a modern nation state. Although Chen took Occidentalism as a counterdiscourse negating both the West and tradition, it

¹³⁵ This is obvious from the intellectual debates during the May Fourth era. For this Westernization during the May Fourth period, I don’t mean Marxist universalism per se, but any universal idea with a Western origin. I suggest that the doubtful shadow for the enlightenment not only comes from the other groups who favor traditional values, but also from within the group who promoted enlightenment and Westernization.

¹³⁶ Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* (The complete collection of Lu Xun’s works) (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1991), Vol 11, 20, 354. See Cheng Guangwei, *Zhongguo xindai wenxueshi*. 5.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Xiaomei Chen, “Occidentalism as Counterdiscourse: ‘Heshang’ in Post-Mao China” in *Critical Inquiry*, 18. No.4. 686-712.

nonetheless uprooted the ideas from their Western origin and transplanted them into the Chinese historical landscape. The negotiation between the past and the future, as well as the transplantation of the Western universal, controversially and continually, manifested the universalistic and moralizing tendency in Chinese historical consciousness deeply rooted in tradition.

The acceptance of Marxism in China also experienced such a process of transplantation. Yet it seems that it was not until the outbreak of the War of Resistance to Japan that the intellectuals found a way to deal with this Western universal and re-center it into China. During this period, a dialectic conception of Marxist universality and Chinese particularity grew into fruition, which artistically resolved the tension between the world historical trend (shi shi 时势) and China's domestic situation (xing shi 形势), and between China's past and present. In 1938, Mao Zedong openly articulated his understanding of Marxism and its relationship with China's history:

China today has developed from the China in history; as we are believers in the Marxist approach to history, we must not cut off our whole historical past. We must make a summing-up from Confucius down to Sun Yat-sen and inherit this precious legacy....Communists are internationalist-Marxists, but Marxism must be integrated with the specific characteristics of our country and given a national form before it can be put into practice....If the Chinese Communists, who form a part of the great Chinese nation and are linked with it by flesh and blood, talk about Marxism apart from China's characteristics, that will be only Marxism in the abstract, Marxism in the void. Hence how to turn Marxism into something specifically Chinese, to imbue every manifestation of it with Chinese characteristics, i.e. to apply it in accordance with China's characteristics, becomes a problem which the whole Party must understand and solve immediately.¹³⁹

Before this talk, the Communist Party had experienced enough frustration in its confrontations with the Nationalist Party, which finally led to the Long March,

¹³⁹ Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (London: Lawrence & Wishart LTD, 1954), Vol. 2, 260.

retreating from urban areas to the countryside to save itself. During the Long March (1934-1936), the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) leadership decided to adopt Mao Zedong's idea of initiating the revolution from the countryside instead of cities, which determined Mao's leading status in the Party. Mao's revolutionary model, as opposed to the Russian model dogmatically advocated by Wang Ming, Li De, and other Marxists coming back from Russia, was believed to be the right model considering China's particular situation. Practically tested, Marxism with Chinese variation had gradually gained authority within the CCP. After the outbreak of the War of Resistance to Japan in 1937, Mao took steps further to theorize his model of "Marxism with Chinese characteristics" to promote the Communist Party's status and attract support as much as possible throughout China. On the surface, he differentiated Chinese particularity from universal Marxism, yet by emphasizing Chinese history and national form, he successfully *grounded* Marxism in China, in Chinese history. It is in effect an event of *universalizing the particular*. The Western origin of Marxism was finally re-planted in China. In fact, the inventiveness of the Chinese revolutionary practice has been characterized in such a way that in later decades Mao's thought became the synthesis of Marxism and Leninism, and the Chinese practice, along with the other revolutionary practices in the developing countries, became the moral and theoretical ground to counter the American and the Soviet hegemony in the world. As Wang Hui pointed out, Mao's concept of Chinese Marxism had always been positioned on the global horizon and been the moralistic narrative to oppose world hegemonic power. In Wang's words, "The 'Three Worlds' theory did not only posit the Third World as a political subject, which, through links and breaks with elements of the Second World, would oppose the two hegemonic powers, the USA and USSR, and form a new kind of international relations. It also sought, through theoretical investigation, political debate and moral appeal, to break the ideological power and

prestige of the American and Soviet systems. The practice of counter-hegemony implied a contestation of *cultural* authority.”¹⁴⁰

Such is the trajectory of the legitimizing and grounding process of Marxism in China. What it implies is that, although a certain development of history could be seen as the result of discursive negotiation among different forces within the signifying regime, in a longer period of time, the negotiations among diversified interests still manifest the imperial pattern: the imperial-time regime disguised in the Maoist Marxism continually articulates the moralizing and unifying tendencies in the name of the modern nation state. As I have suggested in the prior chapter, Marxism in China is none other than an unexamined substitution of the traditional way of thinking.

However, there is always a tension between the moralistic cyclical time and the linear historical time as conceived by the modern intellectuals. Falling between the two polarities of either past or future as the authoritative force to make judgment, intellectuals found themselves in the middle of the negotiations among competing discourses and aware of changes along history. The hesitation to characterize the present casts a doubtful shadow in their ability to effect a novel and creative change in the modern world. Hence, the conscious belief that history develops in a progressive, linear trajectory is always accompanied with the unconscious specter of history unfolding itself in its way, and (limited) human agency can only make sense when conforming to the historical trend (shi势).

As a result, although the historical novels and dramas were written to reflect reality, and most often, the authors openly articulated their intention, there are still many areas in which the authors wrestled with doubt and ambivalence in portraying the present and figuring the future: the ethnic tensions in treating national crisis, the

¹⁴⁰ Wang Hui, “Depoliticized Politics: From East to West” in *New Left Review*, Vol.41, Sept-Oct. 2006, 41.

competing discourses vis-à-vis moral choices, and the poetics of martyrdom to promote morality while not falling into fatalism.

History as negative exemplum: both hermeneutic and rhetoric

There is a long tradition in China that history serves as the exemplum for the present, and the person with great morality will be the exemplar for the later generations. As the Tang Emperor Taizong said, “A bronze plate as mirror can make one adjust hat and clothing; history as mirror can tell one the pattern of rise and fall/replacement [of the empire]; a person as mirror can remind one of his achievement and shortcomings.”¹⁴¹ What it implies is that through history one can delineate the pattern of cyclical development of the empire, to recognize the *shi-trend* (historical trend 势) and *shi-time* (historical time 时), and by following the great moral exemplars, one can grasp the trend and benefit the empire. The metaphor of the “mirror,” similar to the Lacanian “mirror stage” in the sense that it situates the individual in the symbolic regime that is history, gives prominence to the consciousness that one lives *in* history, though one is not in a state of psychological split confused about the imaginary and the symbolic.

Nevertheless, an exemplum is not merely a mirror in the hermeneutic sense, but is itself rhetorical. It aims to cause action, to provoke reflection, imitation, and transformation of the individuals. On the one hand, it understands the priority of antiquity to be ontological as well as historical: past experiences are seen to be sources of universal value and morality which the present must appropriate through a hermeneutic motion of a leap across time. On the other hand, it is rhetorical. The

¹⁴¹ The original Chinese for this quote is “以铜为镜，可以正衣冠；以史为镜，可以知兴替；以人为镜，可以明得失”。

exemplum can be seen as a kind of textual node or point of juncture, where one's interpretation of the past overlaps with the desire to form and fashion the present.¹⁴²

In this regard, the fact that imperial history was constantly refashioned into modern literary representations manifests the desire to call for morality at times that lack morality, and to emphasize unity in times of disunity. Indeed, it is the impossibility of ultimate morality that makes morality possible and meaningful. The Southern Song and Southern Ming histories, owing to their complicated ethnic encounters that characterized the crisis of the ethnic Han Chinese Empires, became the mirror of China in the modern period, especially during the late Qing and then the War of Resistance to Japan. In the historical fiction and drama of these periods, morality takes the form of loyalty and unity as the crucial factors in saving the country from foreign invasion. From a Han-centered perspective, moral crisis outstrips national crisis, and the contrast between patriotic heroes and disloyal traitors dominates the Han/non-Han contradictions. In fact, the voice for morality is so predominant that ethnic tensions became secondary in mirroring the national crisis in reality.

In this respect, the anti-Manchu or anti-Mongol messages manifested in the historical novels and dramas could be read in a metonymical way: the Manchus or the Mongols are but the foil of the Chinese, whose lack of morality and unity from within resulted in the loss of leadership in the empire. On the other hand, the fact that the Yuan and Qing dynasties are taken as part of Chinese history grounded on the same Confucian morality demonstrates the competing discourses within the Chinese Empire: the transcendent moral judgment on unity and the recognition of an amoral historical trend (shi 勢) that justifies contingent behavior associated with particular situations

¹⁴² Timothy Hampton, *Writing from History: the Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1990).

(quan bian 权变). In other words, the confirmation of both morality and amoral situation constitutes the basic paradox in the historical narratives, which only gives rise to the poetics of martyrdom as the highest form of morality, and as a comparison with reality, a way to incorporate the individual, or the people, into the project of nation building.

In fact, I suggest that the poetics of martyrdom best manifest the imperial-time regime that permeates the authors' writings, regardless of their subjective intention, because martyrdom at once asserts the moral agency of a hero and debilitates that agency in history.

There are roughly four periods in which historical novels and dramas were relatively abundant during these eighty years. During the late Qing period Wu Jianren's *Tongshi* (Painful history, 1902-1906), *Liang Jin yanyi* (The Story of Western and Eastern Jin, 1906-1908), and Li Liangcheng's *Re xuehen* (The trace of warm blood, 1907) are the most influential novels.¹⁴³ During the May Fourth period, there are Lu Xun's *Gushi xinbian* (Old tales retold, 1922-1935) and Guo Moruo's dramatic trilogy *Sange panni de nüxing* (Three rebellious women). During the War of Resistance to Japan, there are historical plays written by Guo Moruo (*Qu Yuan* 1942, *Hufu* 1942, *Tangdi zhi hua* 1941, etc.), A Ying (*Bixue hua* 1939, *Haiguo yingxiong* 1940, *Yang E zhuan* 1941, etc.), Ouyang Yuqian (*Zhongwang Li Xiucheng* 1941), and Chen Baichen (*Dadu he* 1943), etc. During the Maoist socialist period, there are Guo Moruo's plays *Cai Wenji* (1959), *Wu Zetian*, and the revised *Gao Jianli*, Tian Han's *Guan Hanqing*, Cao Yu's *Dan jian pian* (Courage and sword), and Yao Xueyin's novel *Li Zicheng*.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ A Ying, *Wanqing xiaoshuo shi* (The late Qing history of fiction) in *A Ying quanji* (The complete anthology of A Ying), ed. Ke Ling, (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999).

¹⁴⁴ I don't mean to use these periods as some demarcation. On the contrary, they are the mere stones that both differentiate and incorporate literary practices during a longer period. There are also other historical novels that were written and published in Taiwan, Hong Kong, or overseas during the Maoist

Chronologically speaking, there is a thematic shift in these historical narratives from ethnic contradiction to class contradiction. Symptomatic of the national crisis during the first half of the 20th century, historical narratives at that time usually take a defensive position resisting the external threat and criticizing internal splits in the Han Chinese group, thus playing out the tension between empire and modern nation state in terms of national, ethnic, and cultural boundaries. The later historical narratives, on the other hand, are devoted to confirming a multi-ethnic, unified, socialist country with a gradual march toward the telos of class-based literature of political utility enshrined in Maoist thought. The shift of focus, however, far from showing the explicit contradiction in the discourse of nation building, on the contrary, continually articulates unity and morality as the transcendent symbolic regime that organizes the new nation.

The transformations of narrative forms: the specter of modernity

A great deal of work has been done on the transformation of narrative forms in modern Chinese literature. The impact of Western literature enabled Chinese writers to make use of the first-person narrative and discover the interior psychology of characters, which along with the linear causality of emplotment and other narrative techniques mark the decisive change in form from the premodern to modern. Historical narratives seem to be no exception. The advent of Lu Xun's short stories, the blossoming of spoken drama stage plays, and the success of modern novels provide multiple platforms to represent history in the modern period.

period. For instance, Gao Yang's historical novels in Taiwan, Jin Yong's martial arts novels in Hong Kong, Lin Yutang's *Biography of Wu Zetian* published in the United States in 1959, and so forth. Since they were not available in the mainland until the late 1980s, I exclude them from the discussion in this chapter.

In addition to such aspects, in terms of temporal-spatial configurations, traditional form and modern form also manifest different patterns. Traditionally, historical narrative, evolved from the early forms of storyteller's scripts—from the Tang *bianwen* (变文), Song and Yuan *huaben* (话本), to the later form of historical *yanyi* (演义), was subordinated to official historiography, which emphasized both factual recording of events and moral judgment of the historians. As a result, fiction writers imitated historians in elaborating various events which may or may not directly relate to the central theme.¹⁴⁵ Consequently, two contradictions constitute the open structure of the traditional narrative: one is the discrepancy between the detailed portrayal of events (moral or immoral) and the intrusion of the authorial voice to call for morality, which makes the process of identification problematic; the other is the tension between the cluster of events and the overall structure, which results in the lack of concern for overall structural coherence. As Andrew Plaks pointed out, the traditional Chinese narrative manifests a pattern that resembles the Chinese Empire with “ceaseless alternation,” “complementary bipolarity,” and “cyclical recurrence,” or “multiple periodicity.” In his words:

What we observe in the structural patterning of Chinese narrative is an interminable *overlapping*—a dense web of intermingled events and non-events which obviates any sense of unilinear plot development and hence clouds the perception of artistic unity... It is not a lack of movement (or development), but the *totalization* of temporal flux which dispenses with a clear sense of direction and hence creates the impression of motionlessness. (italics in the original text)¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Lin Qingxin, *Brushing History against the Grain*. 9.

¹⁴⁶ Andrew Plaks, “The Problem of Structure in Chinese Narrative,” *Tamkang Review*, Vol VI, No 2 and Vol VII, No 1, Oct 1975-Apr 1976, 437.

David Der-wei Wang interpreted this “motionlessness” as the effect of imitating the storytelling to “synchronize the continuous diachronic sequence.”¹⁴⁷ What this “motionlessness” implies is the spatialization of temporality and an overlapping between narrator and author. It is as if all the events are taking place in the present, while the narrator articulates his authorial moral judgment as a sort of collective unconscious. Such a “motionless” form, seen by Lin Qingxin as a “spatial narration,”¹⁴⁸ manifests the heterogeneous time in representing the Chinese Empire: the transcendent, omnipresent moral time and the amoral *shi-trend* in the present. The multiple characters (usually quite numerous) hence embody the hierarchy of morality, exhibiting the *differential* temporality in the typology of the empire.

In contrast to traditional “spatial narration,” Lin suggests that modern narrative displays a sense of “temporal narration” in that the plot usually unfolds a linear causality, while the movement of the characters in space manifests “homogeneous, empty” modern time. The intrusive authorial voice mostly disappears, and the moral message, as I will show in the following sections, is articulated implicitly or explicitly through the characters. Instead of an all-encompassing, open structure inviting multiple readings, the modern narrative demonstrates a closed structure exhibiting a temporal sequence to construct a meaningful totality.

However, the boundary between the two forms, to borrow from Lin, the “spatial form” and the “temporal form,” is not clear cut in modern historical narratives. Not only does the moral message become even more unitary and monolithic, only manifesting the “collective consciousness” (as opposed to the “collective unconscious”), but the narrator also remains omniscient in portraying the events. In

¹⁴⁷ David Wang, *Xiangxiang zhongguo de fangfa: lishi, xiaoshuo, xushi* (The ways to imagine China: history, fiction, narration) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1998), 90.

¹⁴⁸ Lin Qingxin, *Brushing History against the Grain: Reading the Chinese New Historical Fiction (1986-1999)*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 17.

terms of narrative medium, the stage play is designed for performance, itself being a “spatial” form to unfold relations among different parties in different settings/places. Moreover, the novel, due to its huge capacity for narration, often manifests a dialogic feature of heteroglossia, which diverts from the unilinear totality. For instance, it is not hard to see the traditional heritage in Yao Xueyin’s *Li Zicheng*.

Furthermore, in terms of time manifested in the narrative, rather than a homogeneous, linear time, scholars have discovered that modern narrative nonetheless bears the capacity to exhibit heterogeneous time. Sabina Knight observed that with the techniques of “foreshadowing,” “backshadowing,” and “sideshadowing,” modern writers were able to construct ambiguous narratives in contrast to the seemingly unitary structure.¹⁴⁹ In the case of historical narrative, I would suggest distinguishing “effectiveness” from “effect.” In other words, the modern historical narrative may have been successful in creating a homogeneous, linear and progressive time, meaning it is “effective” in participating in the project of modernization, yet the “effect” it projects onto the audience nevertheless manifests a *differential* time against the present. Between the past and the present emerges the synthetic differential time which counters the “homogeneous, empty” modern time. In fact, the genre of historical narrative, owing to its moralistic agency, instead of representing a petrified history with mere historical significance, as a whole casts a shadow of challenge on the project of modernity.

In sum, although there is change in the narrative form in the modern period, and although the writers were obsessed with modernization in both form and content, historical narrative, just as imperial history itself, not only participates in the

¹⁴⁹ Sabina Knight, *The Heart of Time: Moral Agency in Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction*. Knight is inspired by these concepts as introduced in Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadow of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

inevitably hybrid Chinese modern, but also manifests the long lasting penetrating impact of tradition.

CHAPTER 3

Staging Empire: Literary Representations of Imperial History (1900-1981)

This manner of portrayal is simply the artistic expression of that genuine historicism—the conception of history as the destiny of the people—which motivated the classics.

----Georg Lukács. *The Historical Novel*

What has happened to the historical figures—the past emperors, ministers, generals, peasant rebels—in the modern period when the Chinese Empire has ceased to exist and modernity gained hegemony? How did they participate in the projects of enlightenment and nation building? Writers at various historical moments constructed historical characters to serve their conscious purposes, but also revealed unacknowledged anxiety and ambivalence in their dealing with history. This chapter will direct attention to several historical novels and plays in chronological order, to explain that for almost a century, regardless of the discursive formation of a modern nation state in different time periods, the imagination of China manifests its imperial pattern through time.

Between China and Tianxia: Wu Jianren's Tongshi (Painful history)

In the late Qing period, along with the blossoming of the “new fiction” which focused on representing social reality and translating foreign works, historical narratives also drew great public attention. Among them Wu Jianren's *Tongshi* (Painful history), *Liang Jin yanyi* (The story of Western and Eastern Jin dynasties), Li Liangcheng's *Rexue hen* (The trace of warm blood), and Tongku sheng II's (Crying man II) *Choushi* (The history of hatred) deserve investigation. All depicting periods of crisis in history, these novels aim to mirror the critical situation of early twentieth-

century China and call for nationalist sentiment to rescue the country from Western imperialist aggression.¹⁵⁰

Published in *New Fiction (Xin xiaoshuo)* during 1902-1906, Wu Jianren's *Tongshi* was regarded by A Ying as the best historical novel in the late Qing period.¹⁵¹ Depicting the fall of the Southern Song (1127-1279 AD) to the Yuan Empire (1271-1368 AD), *Tongshi* was written to mirror the corrupt society in the late Qing period in order to arouse nationalistic sentiment against Western imperialism. Using a storyteller as narrator in the first chapter, Wu attributes the fall of a nation to the lack of morality within. Although he embraced the law of the jungle and acknowledged the might of forces from outside,¹⁵² he nonetheless believed that unconditional loyalty to the country, fearless fighting spirit, and unity from within would save the country from falling. In his words:

As long as everyone in the country has backbone (*zhi qi* 志气), and is determined to fight until the last person, then the country will not fall....I am angered that many of our fellow Chinese so lack courage and uprightness (*xue xing* 血性) that they often voluntarily sell out the country to the enemy, and even bring the enemy to slaughter their own compatriots. Rather than feeling a bit ashamed of themselves, they are even proud of their betrayal! I have no way to understand what kind of material their heart is made of, so I intend to portray their stories in order to mirror the present.¹⁵³

To some extent, the novel is a portrait of the negative exemplars, national traitors, and the corrupt ruling house in the Southern Song period. The confrontation between the Song and the Mongols is manifested in the encounter between the Chinese—the loyal

¹⁵⁰ A Ying, *Wanqing xiaoshuo shi* (The history of late Qing fiction). In *A Ying quanji* (the complete collection of A Ying's works). (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), Vol 8.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 163.

¹⁵² In the opening paragraph of the first chapter, he naturalized the competition among countries and acknowledged that the winner was usually the most powerful. Yet he took a defensive position from the perspective of the weak country, promoting martyrdom to defend the country from falling.

¹⁵³ Wu Jianren, *Tongshi*. In *Wu Jianren quanji* (The complete collection of Wu Jianren's works) (Beijing: Beifang wenyi chubanshe, 1997), Vol. 4, 3.

fighters in the Southern Song and the conspirators who choose to serve the Mongol court. Portrayed as an uncivilized, culturally inferior, and militarily aggressive people, the Mongols are rarely present in the narrative except that they are mentioned as assimilated barbarians to be incorporated into the Chinese Empire whereupon they become the (il)legitimate rulers. In chapter one, the narrator introduces the process through which the Mongol tribal federation developed into the Yuan empire. Assisted by an official named Liu Bingzhong, who was ethnically Chinese, Kublai Khan chose the Chinese character “Yuan”—from the Chinese classic *Book of Changes*—as the title of his empire and adopted the whole political structure from the Chinese imperial regime (5). Insofar as Liu inherited and transmitted Chinese culture to the Mongol ruler, his loyalty to the Mongol court is seen by the narrator as a misplaced loyalty defined within the Chinese moral regime. Culturally expansive and inclusive yet politically defensive and resistant, Wu Jianren’s narrative manifests his fundamental ambivalence in understanding the relationship between the Chinese Empire and the emerging idea of nation state in his time.

Compared to the comment on Liu Bingzhong, whose family had served non-Chinese powers for generations and whose loyalty to the Mongols is granted legitimacy due to his transmission of Chinese culture, Wu’s attitude toward the Song officials who surrendered to the Mongol power was much harsher. Among those people whom he termed “evil officials” (*quan jian* 权奸) and “traitors” (*han jian* 汉奸), Jia Sidao was especially corrupt, dominating, and disloyal. Wu celebrated his death in a toilet as “leaving his stench for ten thousand years” (*yi chou wan nian* 遗臭万年) and treated the avenging murderer Zheng Huchen as a hero.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, the capitulating officials Zhang Hongfan and Liu Mengyan were seen as those who have

¹⁵⁴ Wu Jianren admits that in the official history, Zheng Huchen, who killed Jia Sidao, was captured and prosecuted later. Yet in his narrative, he treated Zheng Huchen as a hero who continued heroic, secret operations against the Mongol ruling house after he killed Jia.

betrayed their ancestors and deserved to be condemned for centuries. This attitude is best articulated in Zhang Gui's words in Chapter Eight. Facing the tempting rhetoric of surrender from Zhang Hongfan, Zhang Gui convincingly reprimands Hongfan for his lack of responsibility towards the Zhang ancestors. Juxtaposing the Zhang lineage with China, Gui criticizes Hongfan because the latter not only betrayed China, but also stigmatized the reputation of the Zhang family (34). Later in Chapter Eighteen, after Zhang Hongfan has defeated the Song army, he orders his name to be inscribed in stone to glorify his military accomplishment. The inscription appears as "Here is the place where Zhang Hongfan defeated the Song." Following this passage, the narrator sarcastically inserts an episode from the later Ming Dynasty when a scholar changed the inscription into one that reads: "Here is the place where Zhang Hongfan of the Song defeated the Song." The glory of helping establish the Yuan Empire is thus immediately transformed into the villainy of disloyalty to the Song. The coexistence of different historical times, the juxtaposition of military accomplishment with lack of integrity on this monumental stone, entails the all-encompassing moral assessment transcending time and space. It prompts the narrator to intrude immediately following the episode: "Right now [late Qing] those 'gentlemen' who are flattering the foreigners should be cautious that, someday later, there might be another scholar who would insert 'Chinese' in front of their titles [should they succeed in helping the foreign country to defeat China]!" (166)

The moral judgment from the authorial voice displays the generic tradition in historical *yanyi* narrative where the author or the orator superimposes his moral vision onto the stories he is telling, regardless of the open, episodic structure of the narrative.¹⁵⁵ Yet what is latent here is the omniscient view of time—past and future—that

¹⁵⁵ See the discussion in the previous chapter comparing the different narrative modes: historical *yanyi* and modern play.

oversees and defines the present. It is not so much the author who elevates himself to insert his own perspective as it is time being endowed with transcendent moral judgment that enfolds the author. Indeed, the reference to the ancestors and the future generations has linked the past and the future together to form a continuous historical consciousness which constitutes a moral eye to *see* through the present reality. This eye, historically transcendent and morally universal, confines the individual within its powerful horizon and *places* him in history. It is through this all-encompassing moral eye that Wu Jianren created the positive and negative exemplars to make them performative figures triggering emulation or disdain.

In contrast to the immoral officials and the incapable ruling house that together resulted in the fall of the Southern Song, there are also many heroic figures praised as loyal and righteous fighters standing up for the country. Minister Wen Tianxiang, General Zhang Shijie, Scholar Xie Junzhi, and the fearless warriors hidden on Mount Xianxia together construct a collective picture of heroes. Though they are from different social status, they share the common characteristic of unconditional patriotism considering loyalty and righteousness more valuable than life. Facing a devastatingly overwhelming situation, they choose to fight until the last minute when death completes, and continues, their spirit.

Indeed, in situations when morality is impossible to achieve in life, death becomes the possible agency to accomplish the moral mission. Death is not the end of life; rather, it is the continuation of the moral life which addresses the living to act in emulation. To some extent, death is valued more than life in that it places the hero in history, immortal. Wu Jianren obviously followed this poetics of martyrdom to dramatize, even mystify, the moral death in order to express his strong moral judgment. For instance, Wen Tianxiang's death is portrayed as something of a miracle, one that proves his undying morality that overpowers the Mongol intruders. As the widely

adored prime minister of the Southern Song, Wen Tianxiang is unfortunately captured by the Mongol army led by Zhang Hongfan. No matter how hard the Mongol officials try to persuade him, he would rather die than to serve the Mongol regime. Reluctantly accepting the fact that Wen Tianxiang would not surrender on whatever alluring condition, the first Yuan emperor Kublai Khan finally decides to take Wen's life. Yet, admiring his upright spirit, he grants Wen a posthumous title and orders a memorial ceremony to be conducted for him. However, no sooner does the ceremony start than the clear, sunny sky suddenly becomes darkened by thick, black clouds. Following a deafening thunder, pouring rain falls and a gust of wind blows away Wen's memorial tablet inscribed with the posthumous title given by Kublai Khan. Shocked and threatened, the Mongol officials immediately replace it with another tablet with Wen's former Southern Song official title. Mystically, the sky soon clears up again. In the meantime, on the execution ground, people of the Southern Song discover that Wen's face appears as if he were alive and his body continuously emits a fragrance after his death, which vividly demonstrates the idiom "leaving a fragrance for a thousand years" (*liu fang qian gu* 流芳千古).(179)

This imagined scene, needless to say, is both inconsistent and supernatural. It is inconsistent because the Mongol court admiringly worships Wen's spirit according to the Chinese ritual, yet heartlessly discards his body on the execution ground. It is supernatural for its mystical descriptions of "Heaven's anger" and Wen's immortal dead body. Nevertheless, it at once glorifies Wen's virtue and demonstrates the assimilative power of this China-originated virtue to the barbarians. Meanwhile, on the Chinese side, the portrayals of Jia Sidao's stinking corpse and Wen Tianxiang's fragrant remains best illustrate the stark contrast between disloyalty and loyalty, between immorality and morality, and between transient life and immortal death. By literalizing metaphors (fragrance and stench as the metaphors for one's posthumous

reputation), Wu Jianren disrupts the conventional relation between the signifier and the referent, and directly addresses the physical senses to arouse people's consciousness. The boundary between the spiritual and the material is blurred, and immortality turns into a sensory reality. The materiality of the body, is thus imbued with both historical consciousness and universal moral judgment, and transformed into a performative site registered in time and being instrumental for its own perpetuation.

However, beneath the transcendent moral judgment exists the contingent situation. It brings to the surface the competing discourses that challenge the hierarchical configuration of the morality, and stresses the individual moral agency that renders the reconfiguration of the hierarchy meaningful. For instance, in a situation in which the imperial family is corrupt and weak, loyalty to what or whom becomes a discursive yet meanwhile historically determined choice. Not only does the rhetoric of the saying that “the capable bird chooses the better wood to inhabit” (*liang qin ze mu er qi* 良禽择木而栖) destabilize the discourse of loyalty, but the amoral *shi-force* in the contingent situation (*xingshi* 形势) and the irreversible historical *shi-trend* (*dashi* 大势) also problematize the hierarchy of the moral system. The “better wood” that attracts the capable bird, like the rising Mongol power in the novel, usually represents the promising *shi-force*, yet whether it also follows the historical *shi-trend* depends on a more-encompassing moral ground and historical recognition. In *Tongshi*, the hierarchy of morality is established in this way, from lower to higher levels: pursuing individual interest—loyal to the Song emperor—loyal to the Song Empire—serving all under Heaven (*Tianxia*). Once there is some contradiction between the levels in the middle, as in the case that the emperor could not represent the empire any more, for example, the higher level determines the moral choice. In the novel, to save the Song from falling, the loyal officials set up several young emperors in succession as the legitimate representatives of the Song even when the former emperor Deyou is

still alive and kept by the Mongols as hostage. In the end, when nobody in the imperial family is available to be the emperor, the discourse that “China is the China of all Chinese, anyone who is especially moral could govern it” emerges to surface. This choice, on the one hand, manifests the traditional notion of contingent decision (*quan bian* 权变) following the discursive situation (*xingshi* 形势); on the other hand, the choice nonetheless reveals the overpowering, unifying morality that determines the significance of the decision.

One could see the emergent notion of modern nation state in Wu Jianren’s writing, which implies more an egalitarian sovereignty rather than hierarchical imperial sovereignty, as manifested in the heroes hidden on Mount Xianxia. Yet interestingly enough, the modern nation state he tried to imagine is not only fully embedded within the Chinese imperial moral regime, but also rendered self-contradictory when he attempted to assert a national boundary. Just before the ending of the novel, which he never completed, Wu shifted the discourse of the nation to the discourse of “Tianxia”: “‘Tianxia’ is one that belongs to all-people-under-Heaven,” he wrote through Zhao Zigu’s mouth, “only he who is virtuous could govern it.” (235) Zhao stresses the continuity of Chinese imperial history by asserting that the first Emperor of the Song Dynasty, Zhao Kuangyin, inherited the empire from the ancient Zhou dynasty, implying that the legitimacy of Zhao’s rule was determined by the imperial-time regime: morality and unity granted a significant place for the emperor in history (235). The confrontation with the Mongols thus leads to the question whether the Mongols should be included in “Tianxia” (are they civilized enough?) and whether they are moral enough to rule. The narrowly defined ethnic nationalism therefore gives way to the Chinese notion of “Tianxia” in the imperial moral order.

Tongshi was never completed, partly because Wu Jianren could not resolve the contradiction between ethnic nationalism and the more universal understanding of the

Chinese Empire. His strong identification with the Song heroes' fighting spirit and the ambivalent vision toward the Yuan constitute the fundamental tension in the novel. He later changed his anti-Manchu attitude,¹⁵⁶ as it is groundless in the anti-Mongol narrative. As a result, *Tongshi* became an incomplete statement of the unsettled tension between modern nation state and empire, and a testimony to the undying imperial-time regime working through the modern transition, regardless of the discursive imagination of a modern nation state imposed from Western discourse.

Between the rhetorical and the real: Lu Xun's Gushi Xinbian (Old tales retold)

If the imperial-time regime acts out the social unconscious latent in the late Qing transitional generation, Lu Xun's *Gushi Xinbian* (hereafter *Xinbian*) nonetheless poses the question whether it is possible to escape the all-encompassing and all-consuming power of this regime. Written from 1922 to 1935, *Xinbian* contains eight short stories from ancient mythology and history re-told in the form of national allegory to mirror the reality of his society.¹⁵⁷ In other words, the collapse of the distinction between the past and the present temporalities has rendered the narrative a timeless history, one that transcends both past and present, posing questions about the future.

Indeed, the temporal dimension in these stories casts a doubtful shadow on both past and present, which underscores Lu Xun's ambivalent attitude, which is not only skeptical about past civilization, but also pessimistic about the current enlightenment. Critics have noted that *Xinbian* was written at a time when Lu Xun constantly experienced personal and social crises. Coexistent with other contemporary works that manifest his iconoclastic fighting spirit, *Xinbian* exhibits Lu Xun's deepest

¹⁵⁶ A Ying, *Wanqing xiaoshuo shi* (A history of late Qing fiction), in *A Ying quanji*, 163.

¹⁵⁷ Cheng Guangwei, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shi*, 65.

suspicion about the innovative change in society and the possibility of enlightenment. As both a fighter and doubter, Lu Xun found himself being caught in his vision of history and Chinese civilization in general.¹⁵⁸

Among the eight stories, “Bu tian” (Mending the skies) was written in 1922; “Ben yue” (Flight to the Moon) and “Zhu jian” (Forging the swords) were written in 1926. Accompanying his enthusiastic heralding of the iconoclastic enlightenment movement and calling for an individualistic, humanistic society, these three stories nonetheless reveal Lu Xun’s fundamental distrust of the enlightenment, the doubt that is deeply ingrained in the Chinese civilization. Written about heroes in ancient times—Nüwa the Goddess-Creator, Houyi, the legendary archer who shot down nine suns in the sky, and Meijianchi, who successfully avenged his father’s death, all three stories pose the question: what would have happened after the heroes accomplish their extraordinary deeds. In comparison with the reality of Lu Xun’s time, the question then becomes the quest for the future after the enlightenment movement and the destiny of the heroes. All three heroes experience unavoidable adversity and eventually loss. And the efforts of the first, their forerunner, prove to be no more than a futile attempt. Not only does Nüwa encounter criticism and misunderstanding when she tries to repair the sky, but she also suffers the exploitation of her body and name after she dies of her exhausting work. Those who she created yet once criticized her now reside in her belly for its rich resources, claiming to be her legitimate descendents. The supposed immortal mountain she placed on the turtle’s back also turns out to be the barbaric islands.¹⁵⁹ The great blueprint to create civilization manifests itself as no more than delusion and miscomprehension.

¹⁵⁸ Qian Liqun, *Gushi xinbian man tan* (A casual reading of *Old tales retold*). A talk given in Guolinfeng bookstore. Electronic access: <http://www.univs.cn/univs/hust/content.php?id=101551>

¹⁵⁹ Lu Xun, “Butian” (Mending the sky). In *Lu Xun quanji* (Complete works of Lu Xun) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1991), Vol 2, 354.

Similarly, in “Benyue,” after Houyi destroys nine suns and all the big animals, he finds himself useless and depressed. He benefits neither the world, nor his family. His heroic behavior ironically eliminates his own resources for survival, which finally results in his wife’s betrayal.¹⁶⁰

The hero’s self doubt and frustration best manifest themselves in “Zhu jian” (Forging the swords). As the Dark Man (*hei se ren*) tries to convince Meijianchi to trust him, he articulates his motivation for revenge that not only comes from his anger toward the hypocritical outside world, but also from within. “I always knew your father, just as I have always known you,” he says, “but this is not the reason why I want to take revenge...What’s yours is mine, and what he was I am too. I bear on my soul so many wounds, inflicted by others as well as by myself, that now I have come to hate myself!”¹⁶¹ This ambiguous statement of the dark avenger is seen by Leo Ou-fan Lee as being without any rational basis and so incomprehensible that it only serves to contribute to the creative surrealism of Lu Xun’s writing.¹⁶² Yet it is this statement in the story that immediately wins Meijianchi’s trust with his life and sword and lays the foundation for the success of the later revenge. The crucial function of the statement implies that Lu Xun had given a lot of thought to it to carry the power of determining life and death. In fact, just as the Dark Man trenchantly comments on the discrepancy between the rhetoric and reality, the mental anguish manifests the society as ill projected on one’s mind. “Oh, kid, please don’t mention these stigmatized terms,” the Dark Man says to Meijianchi after he suggests helping him take revenge,

¹⁶⁰ Critics usually pay more attention to the background of this story, taking the story as Lu Xun’s response to a young writer Gao Changhong at that time. Although Lu Xun admits that the stories in *Xinbian* are not serious historical writings, overly emphasizing the contingent events in his life will only obscure his serious thinking on Chinese civilization. I take this story as the product of his historically-oriented thinking about the enlightenment movement. For another reading of this story, see Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun*. 34.

¹⁶¹ Lu Xun, “Zhu jian.” In *Lu Xun quanji*, Vol 2, 426.

¹⁶² Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 36.

“righteousness (*zhengyi*, 正义) and sympathy, things like that, were once clean, but now they have all become the capital for high-interest loans [to get more repayment]!”

Unlike the madman in “The Madman’s Diary,” whose inversion of madness turns out to be the sober perception of the illness of the society and who appears to be the detached, enlightened individual,¹⁶³ the Dark Man fails to detach himself with a transcendent or interior view of society. Rather, he finds himself tormented within the very heart of society, without any language to justify his action. Inasmuch as the language is manipulated and exploited as pure rhetoric, he is in a non-place of symbolic power. He is not only in a position that is against the king, but he himself is situated within the symbolic order that the king represents. If the king justifies himself as moral and orderly, there is no language left for the Dark Man to claim his righteous stance. Meijianchi’s personal enmity, shouldered by the Dark Man, is in this sense elevated into a social, structural one. By the end of the story, the structural pitfall exhibits itself in such a way that there is no way to distinguish the good from the evil, self from other. The overwhelming symbolic order merges everyone into its melting pot, suggesting that only a return to the primitive could provide justice, grotesquely and speechlessly. It again proves nothing more than the futile attempt to escape civilization. The image of three unidentifiable skulls in the boiling water vividly mirrors the troublesome social reality Lu Xun envisioned. To some extent, the big caldron with boiling water creates an imaginary, allegorical world as opposed to the symbolic world outside the cauldron. Outside, the courtiers, the concubines of the king, and the people who witness the funeral procession, together construct a symbolic social order. In this order structured by language people are blind, ignorant, hypocritical, and incapable of distinguishing the king from the assassins. Only within

¹⁶³ There is also ambiguity in that story. Since the madman finally recovers to become “normal” in the introduction of the narrator, he is hardly an enlightened hero who can escape from the old regime.

the cauldron lies the truth, implying that justice can only be done in a primitive, violent way. It blends the good and evil together, refusing to be characterized in any terms that exist in civilization. It is interesting that the revenge is finally accomplished through a battle among three heads, and the only weapons they have are their mouths and teeth! The image suggests the grotesque demonstration of the pessimistic and sarcastic attitude Lu Xun held toward the intellectual debates and the enlightenment movement.

In her study on Lu Xun's work in this period, Shu-mei Shih pointed out that Lu Xun employed Freudian Psychoanalysis in his experimental writing.¹⁶⁴ Lu Xun himself once explained why he created the character Nüwa the way he did in "Bu tian": he meant to show how the "primordial incipience of the sexual urge resulted in creation and death."¹⁶⁵ Beyond sexual desire in the ahistorical, Freudian sense, Shu-mei Shih observed that the Freudian content in Lu Xun's work nevertheless bears specific historical significance. Lu Xun's use of Freudian psychology "echoes Kuriyagawa Hakuson, in whose conception the repression of desire and life force in the libido produces anguish, and the expression of this anguish in symbolic form is art."¹⁶⁶ Shih interpreted Lu Xun's creation of madness and grotesque images as the manifestation and embodiment of anguish. By constructing madness in grotesque images, Lu Xun was able to release unconscious fears and desires and make manifest the latent content of Chinese society.¹⁶⁷

Focusing on Lu Xun's experimental writing using psychology and other Western techniques, Shih convincingly identified Lu Xun as a complete Occidental

¹⁶⁴ Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, & London: University of California Press, 2001), 89-91.

¹⁶⁵ Lu Xun, "Wo zenme zuoqi xiaoshuo lai" (How I started writing fiction) (1933), in *Lu Xun quanji* (The complete works of Lu Xun), Vol 4, 513.

¹⁶⁶ Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 90.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 90.

who confidently borrowed foreign knowledge and technology without the anxiety of cultural contamination or subjugation.¹⁶⁸ However, she was not convincing in identifying him as a steadfast believer of evolution and progress who only embraced linear development. Freudian psychoanalysis does not signify any sense of historical development as linear and progressive; on the contrary, the repressed, condensed, and displaced desire manifests itself repeatedly in disguised forms. What psychoanalysis conveys is the never-ending pursuit for origin, unfulfilled desire for return, and a non-linear time flow, which appealed to some Chinese intellectuals not only for its insight on individual psychology, but also in its function to be employed to express anxiety and denunciation of society.¹⁶⁹ Shih also acknowledged that psychoanalysis did not fit seamlessly in the May Fourth ideology of progress.¹⁷⁰ Lu Xun's conscious employment of psychoanalysis on the other hand exhibits his unacknowledged doubt about progress and linear development. Just as the grotesque image of three heads signifies the unspeakable horror and violence of civilization beyond comprehension, Lu Xun's use of psychoanalysis casts a doubtful shadow on his enlightenment project.

Moreover, Lu Xun's Occidental universalism, crystallized in his notion of "grabbism" (na lai zhu yi 拿来主义), manifests a broad sense of selectiveness. "[D]efined as borrowing from other countries with confidence, like a master who chooses freely according to his needs and not like a neurotic who fears the loss of indigenous tradition or enslavement by what is borrowed,"¹⁷¹ the concept of "grabbism" does not take the West to be a homogeneous and righteous entity. Rather, it separates the good from the evil, with the good serving for China's enlightenment and the evil threatening to destroy that enlightenment. Seen in this light, both the

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 86.

¹⁶⁹ Jingyuan Zhang, *Psychoanalysis in China: Literary Transformations, 1919-1949* (Ithaca: Cornell East Asia Series, 1992).

¹⁷⁰ Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*. 63.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 86.

boundaries of China and the West become porous. The West is not all together advanced and admirable, and Chinese civilization is not totally corrupt and disposable. In this sense, Lu Xun's iconoclastic stance may be less radical than it appeared to be and his later Marxist turn may become more comprehensible.

Not until the 1930s did Lu Xun's historical fiction manifest more of the positive side of Chinese culture and his collective consciousness. The five stories in *Xinbian* that were written during 1934-1935 shift the focus from an individual hero's destiny to the whole philosophical foundation of the civilization. Still maintaining a sarcastic and pessimistic tone toward the intellectual discourses, Lu Xun nonetheless separated the real from the hypocritical, distinguished the merely speculative from the practical, and turned to the pragmatic, hard-working people he considered as the ridge of the civilization. In these stories, intellectual discourses like Confucianism and Daoism are ruthlessly attacked for their rhetorical face value. While Confucius's *Dao* (the Way) appears to be so hypocritical that it forces Lao Zi to leave in order to avoid Confucius' suspicion and jealousy, Zhuang Zi's *Dao* turns out to be merely speculative, so that it cannot deal with the simple problems in reality. In "Chu Guan" (Cross the Pass), far from being a glorified sage with a perfect personality, Confucius seems to be mediocre and invidious, which diverts him from the moral principle in Confucianism. In "Qi Si" (Resurrection), Zhuang Zi cannot resolve the tension between nature and culture. Even though he believes that naturally, clothes are not necessary for the human being to embrace the *Dao* (the Way) and harmonize with nature, he himself insists on dressing formally to meet authority while refusing to give his clothes to the naked man he reincarnated.

In other stories, the trenchant sarcasm toward intellectual discourses nonetheless gives way to the optimistic portrayal of heroes. Self-sacrificing and courageous, these heroes sincerely care about the people and take great pains to solve

practical problems at times of adversity. Yu-the-Great in “Li Shui” (Pacifying the water) and Mo Zi in “Fei Gong” (Against aggression) belong to this group. Hard working while not expecting personal benefit, they are for Lu Xun the real heroes in Chinese civilization. As Lu Xun passionately described them in his essay, “Since ancient times, there have always been people who are hard working with their head down, who stick to their way even at the cost of their lives, who dare to challenge authority for the benefit of the people, and who sacrifice their lives to pursue justice and truth. They are the backbone of China.”¹⁷² Rather than throwing away the entire intellectual heritage and Chinese civilization, Lu Xun nevertheless distinguished the genuine from the fake, the fighter from the speaker, and the sincere believer from the hypocritical talker. What he was sarcastic and pessimistic about is the dark side of ideology or discourse which was usurped to rule people, not the moral values promoted in the discourse.

However, for Lu Xun, the boundary between the genuine and the fake were not always clear-cut, since he had a deep-rooted suspicion and distrust of human beings and the conditional nature of the traditional moral code. The ambivalence of his attitude best manifests itself in “Cai wei” (Plucking ferns). “Cai Wei” reproduces the story of Boyi and Shuqi recorded in *Shiji* (*The Records of the Grand Historian*). Drawing on other, unofficial historical sources across time, “Cai wei” compresses different perspectives into one tale, which not only casts a doubtful shadow on the protagonists’ character, but also reveals the conditional nature of the moral system in traditional culture.

In the original *Shiji* record, Boyi and Shuqi, sons of Prince Guzhu in the kingdom of Shang, are portrayed as steadfast believers in moral integrity and the

¹⁷² Lu Xun, “Zhongguo ren shi qu zi xin li le ma?” (Are Chinese losing confidence?) in *Qiejieting zawen* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1952), 113.

persistent practitioners of unconditional loyalty toward authority. Disappointed with King Wu's disloyalty and conquest of the Shang, they vow not to eat the rice of the Zhou, the new kingdom replacing the Shang, and hide themselves on Shouyang Mountain, plucking ferns for survival. Almost exhausting the ferns available, they finally starve to death in the mountain. Sima Qian finished this story in *Shiji* with a cool, detached tone without obvious personal judgment, yet he did record the comment by Duke Jiang Taigong in the Zhou who regarded them as the "righteous heroes" (*yishi* 义士). However, Lu Xun referred to other historical sources in *Gushi kao* (the evidential reference of ancient history) and *Lieshi zhuan* (the biography of the martyrs), suggesting that they might not die of their stubborn belief in moral integrity, but of a less noble desire intrinsic in their characters. According to these sources, Boyi and Shuqi in the end stopped plucking the ferns because they were told by a village woman that even the ferns belong to the Zhou kingdom. Trapped in the Zhou yet loyal to the Shang, they have no choice but wait to die. Nonetheless, seeing their righteous behavior, Heaven sends a female deer to feed them with milk. Yet, lured by the deer meat, Shuqi secretly attempts to kill the deer one day. Sensing his intention, the offended deer disappears forever. This causes the two recluses to starve to death.

It is not hard to see that the episodes recorded in *Gushi kao* and *Lieshi zhuan* were later constructs trying to justify the rule of Zhou by challenging the moral integrity of Boyi and Shuqi. On one level, it suggests that the absolute loyalty to one lord leaves no room for survival at times of political transition. Moral integrity consequently has to be conditional or else it is inhumane. On another level, the involvement of Heaven gives reassurance that their moral integrity transcends time and space, that Heaven rewards them with a non-place of the Zhou for survival. However, it is not the Zhou Kingdom or Heaven that causes them to die, but their own desire that is against benevolence and righteousness that kills them. In the latter sense,

the episodes not only promote unconditional morality as a rewarding political orthodoxy, but also shift the focus of moral interrogation from the King of Zhou to Boyi and Shuqi.

Yet, instead of favoring any of the narratives, Lu Xun put all these episodes together into an ambiguous plot. The story of the deer is told by a maid called Ajin. Without testing Ajin's honesty, the story remains an uncertain one. If Ajin is telling the truth, then Boyi and Shuqi appear to be somewhat hypocritical gentlemen who are not as righteous as they claim to be. However, if Ajin is lying, the attitude of other people becomes more interesting. Upon hearing the story, other people in the village feel relieved, implying that in fact people *like to believe* what Ajin says. Since the moral standard they embody is too high for others to follow, in a society that tends to moralize every human behavior, their existence only places huge pressure on other people. On the other hand, if people really believe that the King of Shang is corrupt and immoral, a ruler who is not qualified to be a king and deserves to be overthrown by the Zhou, Boyi and Shuqi's rigid loyalty then appears no more than a tragicomic farce, one that fails to realize the conditional nature of the moral discourse.

Here lies Lu Xun's deepest doubt about the overpowering moral regime. On the one hand, morality is conditional and flexible due to different situations and subject to hermeneutic and rhetorical explanation, which will inevitably be turned into an ideological tool to suppress people; on the other hand, the moralistic regime in Chinese society enfolds every individual in its centripetal current, leaving no room to escape. The blurred boundary between the authenticity and inauthenticity of morality renders it almost impossible to make moral choice. Falling along a spectrum that ranges between absolute moral integrity and unavoidable hypocrisy, Lu Xun found himself being caught in a suffocating web woven with multiple discourses, unable to escape the shadow of tradition. Heroes, like Lu Xun himself, might feel that they are

working *for* history, to change history, yet Lu Xun was pretty much aware that they merely lived *in* history. The history is the iron house he referred to in *Nahan* (A Call to Arms) in which there is no escape.

The continuous history in A Ying's Nanming shiju (The historical plays on the Southern Ming)

If Lu Xun's historical fiction maps the relationship between the individual subject and the iron-house-like culture—individuals living across time and space yet still sharing the same destiny—the historical plays during the War of Resistance to Japan nonetheless portray the relationship between individual heroes and the people, and between the people and the nation.

National defense as a literary topic became the predominant goal in intellectuals' consciousness following the Japanese invasion of Northeast China in 1932 and later the outbreak of full-scale warfare in 1937. In the meantime, the serious national crisis rendered the friction between the CCP (the Communist Party) and the GMD (the Nationalist Party) even more striking. In order to call for unity within China to fight against the common enemy, historical plays were chosen as the weapon to address reality, especially in the areas where direct comments on war faced harsh censorship.¹⁷³ Writers like Guo Moruo, Ouyang Yuqian, A Ying (Qian Xingcun), Yang Hansheng, and Chen Baichen devoted themselves to the creation of historical plays, advocating patriotism, criticizing capitulation, and promoting an upright spirit.¹⁷⁴ These plays usually depict historical heroes who remain righteous and loyal to the country in times of crisis. Like the narratives in the late Qing period, instead of focusing on the confrontation with external enemies, the plays almost always

¹⁷³ In the Japanese-occupied cities like Shanghai and Beijing, writers encountered Japanese censorship; in Chongqing, literary works were to be censored by the GMD authority.

¹⁷⁴ Cheng Guangwei, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shi*. 342.

dramatize the internal contradiction within the country. Thus, the failure of the heroes and the fall of the country are not seen resulting so much from the mighty power of the external invasion as from the immoral betrayal of the traitors. In fact, the resentful sentiment toward traitors and capitulation was so prevalent that the writers couldn't help but intensify individual relations among characters in terms of political crisis, no matter how obscure the "foreign enemy" was defined.

Indeed, as Edward Gunn has convincingly demonstrated, in these plays, the notion of the "foreign" is but an abstract concept.¹⁷⁵ The enemy cannot be reduced to any specific "foreign" category. It only vaguely refers to the powerful outside group who lack legitimacy to rule from the protagonist group's perspective, one perspective that privileges the unity of the empire and represents the people. Such a socialist turn in portraying a unified empire is most explicitly manifested in A Ying's plays at a time of national crisis.

During 1939-1941, A Ying (Qian Xingcun or pen name Wei Ruhui) remained in Japanese-occupied Shanghai and wrote several plays on late Ming and late Qing history. The Southern Ming histories include four plays: *Mingmo yihen* (The eternal regret of the late Ming, or Ge Nenniang, *Bixue hua*), *Haiguo yingxiong* (The hero of the ocean kingdom, or Zheng Chenggong), *Yang E zhuan* (The biography of Yang E), and *Xuandai shenyuan* (or Zhang Cangshui). Dramatizing different heroes associated with different short-lived Southern Ming emperors, the four plays document the enduring effort to recover the Ming Empire after the Manchus occupied Beijing and founded the Qing. All attribute the fall of the Ming to the internal split rather than to the external Manchu enemy, who merely appear to be the immoral, illegitimate, background placeholder of the traitors' soul rather than the powerful foreign invader.

¹⁷⁵ Edward M. Gunn, *Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Peking, 1937-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 127.

Besides the Southern Ming histories, *Hong Xuanjiao*, written in 1941, covers the story of the Taiping rebellion in the late Qing period. By the same token, the Manchu court is taken as no more than the illegitimate ruler of the Chinese Empire. Should the leaders of the peasant rebellion remain unified and far-sighted, they would be able to overthrow the Manchu rule to resurrect the Chinese Empire. In the same spirit, *Li Chuangwang*, written in 1945, depicts the peasant rebellion in the late Ming. Regarding both the Ming Court and the Qing Court as disqualified rulers owing to their exploitation of the people, the play endows the peasant rebels with strength and justification through the people's support. However, the moral decay and the internal contradiction within the peasant leadership finally deprive them of this justification, which ultimately results in the failure of the rebellion.

It is noteworthy that although all these plays portray the predetermined breakdown of such righteous attempts, they all have an open ending, suggesting that in their wake the people will bring hope for the future. The failure or death of the heroes, hence, calls on the people to learn the lessons from the past, to inherit their moral integrity and upright spirit, and to believe that such spirit transcends time and space to be the moral essence of the Chinese Empire.

The moral call in these plays, no doubt, is closely related to the social reality during wartime, yet the moralizing tendency nonetheless manifests the undying imperial-time regime handed down from antiquity. However, unlike Wu Jianren's *Tongshi*, in which the poetics of martyrdom undermines individual agency to change an overwhelming situation, A Ying's plays focus more on the consciousness of time. They pay more attention to the future, a future that is not only based on historical continuity created in a linear fashion, but also the product of the Marxist outlook that defines the present.

The most appealing example is the play *Haiguo yingxiong* (The Hero of the Ocean Kingdom). Written in 1940, this play depicts the effort to recover the Ming Empire led by Zheng Chenggong. As the adopted Son of Emperor Longwu and bestowed with the emperor's surname, Chenggong represents the righteous group to resurrect the Ming Empire. However, his birth father Zheng Zhilong, the dominant official who controls the military force, betrays the emperor and cooperates with the Manchu general Boluo. At the threshold of moral choice, Chenggong places loyalty to the emperor and the Ming Empire ahead of filial piety. He criticizes his father and tries to convince him to fight against the Manchus. In fact, Chenggong appears to be a moral paragon embodying multiple virtues in the play in that he still remains a filial son trying to rescue his father even though his father betrays him. Inspired by his righteous spirit, Chenggong's army is considerably expanded and strengthened, having won several important battles. Yet, because the Manchus initiate a devastating sneak attack at night violating their promise of armistice, Chenggong has no choice but to withdraw to Taiwan to continue his mission. Toward the end, Chenggong hears that his father and the whole family have all been killed by the Qing court. Deeply saddened, he advises his children to carry on the mission of recovering the Ming Empire, patiently and persistently, with the support of the people represented by the unofficial organization Tiandi Hui (literally, The Heaven and Earth Society).

This play gained great success on stage yet also received mixed critical reception, both praise and criticism, in wartime Shanghai. Besides the positive comments from the literary critics, there are two types of negative criticism: one is that the play foretells the doomed defeat in the war against Japan, the other challenges its aesthetic value as a stage play. In the prefaces of the published version, A Ying responded to the latter criticism while Liu Yazhi reacted to the former.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ A Ying, *Haiguo Yingxiong* in *A Ying quanji*, Vol 10, 3-15.

In Liu's preface, he not only highly praised the accomplishment of the play, but also strongly attacked the vision of defeatism held by other critics. For Liu, instead of propagating defeatism, this play anticipated a destined victory in the future. Since Zheng Chenggong's persistent spirit was handed down by the people's organization Tiandi Hui, which later evolved into Sanhe Hui, then Xingzhong Hui, and finally the Tongmeng Hui led by Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan), the success of Sun Yat-sen's revolution thus rightly testified to the victory of Zheng Chenggong. In his words, "The righteous spirit of the three generations of the Prince of Yanping [Zheng Chenggong]'s family and the revolutionary system of the Taiping rebellion were finally inherited by our national founding father, Sun Zhongshan, who continued to carry forward this spirit." Moreover, Liu asserted, Sun Zhongshan's followers would definitely win the war against Japan and take back Taiwan from the Japanese.¹⁷⁷

Needless to say, the historical continuity he created among Zheng Chenggong, the imperial prince, Hong Xiuquan, the failed scholar leading the peasant Taiping rebellion, and Sun Zhongshan, the founding father of the republic, is problematic. What are at stake here are the common traits these people share: the anti-Manchu sentiment (Sun changed his attitude later) and the fighting spirit. Yet for Liu, the Manchus deserved to be blamed not only because they were illegitimate as rulers of the Chinese empire, but also due to their losing Chinese land (including Taiwan) to foreigners. The Manchus could be anything *but* "foreign" to sell out the country. The ethnic nationalism in this sense gives way to the desire to maintain the integrity of the imperial territory, one that could be traced back to history.

The temporal and the spatial dimensions manifested in this play are indexical to the imperial-time regime, in which unity and morality transcend time and space. It at once verifies the vision of the present and legitimizes the prediction of the future.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 5.

It goes without saying that the morality is to some extent updated owing to the modern perspective. In ancient times, social hierarchy is paralleled with moral hierarchy, with the latter legitimizing the former rhetorically, not practically. In A Ying's plays, the common enemy, or the empirical situation, causes the transformation of the social hierarchy into a more egalitarian one, in which morality has the absolute power to call for social mobilization. The more righteous, the more support from the people. The relationship between the individual heroes and the people not only echoes the Tang Dynasty Emperor Taizong's metaphor of a boat on the river, but also goes beyond that metaphor to place the people as the real force in pushing history forward.

On the other hand, the treatment of women figures and gender relations bears significant modern characteristics. For instance, in *Haiguo yingxiong*, A Ying portrayed a talented, patriotic, and sweet girl, Zheng Yu, as Zheng Chenggong's daughter. Yet in reality Yu should be Chenggong's concubine. Reluctant to dismiss such a character, as A Ying greatly admired the upright and virtuous Yu in history, he transformed her into Chenggong's daughter in order to improve Chenggong's image in a modern audience's eyes.¹⁷⁸

The transformation of Yu in the play not only draws Yu out from Chenggong's private family to the public space, but also presents her as an independent subject to carry out the mission of recovering the Ming Empire. As one representative of the next generation, Zheng Yu, together with her brother Zheng Jing, is also incorporated into the project of the revival of the empire.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. 127-130. According to a historical document *Fan Tianlu Conglu* (The documents from Fan Tianlu), Yu was Zheng Chenggong's concubine, pretty and talented, good at writing poems. After Chenggong died, Yu lamented him with the poem: "His bare hand used to lift the Sun and the Moon of the Ming Empire, his cordial heart still shines through the universe of the Han." A subordinate general tried to persuade her to marry him, yet Yu refused him and remained chaste for Chenggong. She finally died as a nun in a Buddhist monastery.

Much has been written about how women were incorporated into nation building during the modern period. From May Fourth enlightenment to the national salvation movement, the women's emancipatory practice proved to be no more than another male-centered attempt to mobilize women, first liberated from the institution of the family, to participate in saving the country.¹⁷⁹¹⁸⁰ Yet the erasure of the gender difference from another angle demonstrates the predominant goal of unity required by the new nation building, a nation that persistently refuses to be confined in the boundary of a modern nation state and constantly refers to the past for legitimation.

The imperial legacy: the intellectual's voice in Guo Moruo's Cai Wenji.

If the wartime historical plays unavoidably exhibit both ambivalence and contradiction, and ambiguously define compatriot-enemy boundaries due to a complicated social context from both within and without, the literature of imperial history during the Maoist period nonetheless manifests a more homogeneous tendency serving to legitimize modern China's boundary and identity.

However, the mission of asserting a socialist nation, as negations of both the capitalist countries and the Chinese traditional empires, requires the construction of the People, a category that demands homogeneity and totality that erases differences. On the other hand, the recurrently strengthened class struggle nonetheless makes it explicit that there is a split within the People. The intrinsic paradox between the nation as a transcendent totality and the People as a class-conscious category alert to difference constitutes the basic tension in the historical representations in Maoist

¹⁷⁹ Dai Jinhua and Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao: xiandai funü wenxue yanjiu* (Emerging from the horizon of history: modern Chinese women's literature) (Beijing: Renmin daxue chubanshe, 2004).

¹⁸⁰ During the 1920s, Guo Moruo wrote several historical plays portraying rebellious women who dared to challenge authority, made their own choice for love, and articulated resistance to the patriarchic society. Nie Ying, Wang Zhaojun, and Zhuo Wenjun, are the heroines in his plays. Yet instead of reincorporating them to society, as in his later plays, he saw them as merely rebellious and individualistic enough for self liberation. See Guo Moruo, *Sange panni de nüxing* (Three rebellious women) (Shanghai: Guang hua shu ju, 1926).

China. Whenever unity was stressed to mirror the newly-founded nation, historical individuals, political or cultural elites alike, became heroes to be applauded, such as Hai Rui, Guan Hanqing, and Xie Yaohuan; whenever class struggle or the internal sociopolitical conflict dominated other concerns, as during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), these historical figures could be seen as the enemy of the socialist revolution, and as a consequence, history turned out to be a very sensitive and dangerous site capable of destroying the writers. In the latter case, such notoriously unjust cases as Wu Han's *Hairui baguan* (Hai Rui dismissed from the office), Tian Han's Peking Opera *Xie Yaohuan*, and Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang*, which were subject to suggestive analysis and condemned as "anti-Party, anti-socialist poisonous weeds," cautioned the writers from writing history during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁸¹

However, before the dramatic and traumatic weight of the allusive historical analysis fell upon literary production, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the predominant goal was still to build a multi-ethnic, unified, socialist country in competition with the western capitalist countries and the Soviet Union, historical plays

¹⁸¹ In November 1965, Yao Wenyan in the Shanghai newspaper *Wenhui Bao* (Mercury) condemned the historian and deputy mayor of Beijing, Wu Han, for representing a positive portrait of the Ming Dynasty official Hai Rui in the opera *Hai Rui Baguan* (Hai Rui dismissed from office). Yao Wenyan's article, condemning Wu Han for justifying Hai Rui—a representative of the landlord class in his view—in Hai's fight against the corrupt official and managing to return the land to people, was later criticized as the bad model of "suggestive historiography." (*yingshe shixue*). That means, Yao Wenyan attacked Wu Han with the excuse that Wu Han was making use of this historical play to disapprove of the contemporary land policy and people's commune system, trying to compromise class contradiction, and crying out the injustice done to the disfavored general Peng Dehuai. According to Yao, since *Hai Rui baguan* does not completely follow the historical facts, there must be some reason for this literary transformation. Under the assumption that all literature reflects the author's class identity, this literary transformation must have manifested the author's intention to justify the landlord class and criticize contemporary policy. This logic, dominantly political and absurd as it seems, forms the essence of the so called "suggestive historiography." By linking the historical situation with the contemporary class struggle, and linking Hai Rui with the contemporary, politically incorrect official, Yao Wenyan was able to transform a historical play into a dangerous bomb capable of initiating a political disaster for many intellectuals in that period. In the same spirit, Guan Hanqing's *Xie Yaohuan* and Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang* underwent the similar attack by bringing forth the social conflict to the stage, which was charged as "anti-Party" and "anti-revolutionary."

revived in the cultural landscape mainly to mirror the contemporary spiritual greatness and practical difficulties. Rather than making clear allusion to contemporary political figures, as suggested in most readings of those historical plays, be it in the Cultural Revolution or the later scholarship, the flourishing of historical plays in this period in my view was symptomatic of the particular cultural-political atmosphere within China, which served more to assert the role and status of intellectuals themselves in the new nation than to praise or criticize the great leader Mao Zedong.

In 1956, the CCP announced the Hundred Flowers policy to let “a hundred flowers blossom, and a hundred schools debate,” encouraging creativity and diversity in cultural production. Yet, soon after in 1957, the “anti-rightist” movement dampened the enthusiasm of the writers for their creativity. Many young writers were sent to the countryside to accept re-education, which signified the delicate status of the intellectuals in the new socialist nation. In 1958, the intense movement of “the Great Leap Forward” once again pressured the writers to increase cultural production. Partly for the purpose of following the policy route, partly in order to navigate in a politically sensitive arena, historical plays were produced to mirror the reality yet avoid representing the reality directly. Meanwhile, they helped assert the intellectual’s status as the legitimately moral voice transcendent of political authority.¹⁸²

During this period, many famous writers devoted themselves to the creation of historical plays. For instance, Tian Han’s *Guan Hanqing*, *Princess Wencheng*, and the Peking Opera *Xie Yaohuan*; Guo Moruo’s *Cai Wenji* and *Wu Zetian*; Lao She’s *Shen quan* (Divine fists); Cao Yu’s *Dan Jian Pian* (Courage and the sword); and Liu Chuan’s *Dou E yuan* (The injustice done on Dou E) all drew great attention from the

¹⁸² Rudolf Wagner observed that during this period, historical dramas were produced as perplexing political texts that needed to be deciphered to serve as social critique due to the sensitive political environment. Refer to Rudolf Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Drama: Four Studies* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990), 2-3.

audience. Primarily focusing on individual heroes of imperial history, these plays all depict these heroes as the representatives of the people, which presumably lays the foundation for the unified empire, and by extension, the modern nation state. The ethnic nationalist sentiment prevalent in the prior periods faded from the historical scenes; rather, ethnic unity became the assumed precondition with no need of further explanation, and the major contradiction shifted to the conflict between the vile officials and the people.

Written in 1958, Tian Han's *Guan Hanqing* gained major success. Depicting the great dramatist Guan Hanqing in the Mongol-ruled Yuan Dynasty, this play portrays a courageous, upright cultural hero who dares to challenge authority to cry out against the injustice done to the common people, even at the cost of his own life. Unlike the historical narratives in the prior periods, anti-Mongol sentiment is nowhere to be found in this play. On the contrary, the Yuan Empire appears to be the legitimate successor and the mirror image of the Han Empire. In critics' eyes, Tian Han created the character Guan Hanqing to mirror himself as a modern intellectual. A modern playwright writing about a dramatist writing historical drama, Tian Han successfully produced a multilayered text with a disguised social critique of the contemporary sociopolitical circumstances.¹⁸³ Identifying with the people, the identification that bestowed upon him ultimate righteousness and morality, he was able to articulate the elitist function of the intellectuals within the people.¹⁸⁴

Among these representatives of the people, Guo Moruo's *Cai Wenji* merits more attention. This play tells the story of the poetess Cai Weiji returning to the Han

¹⁸³ For a more comprehensive analysis of this play, refer to Rudolf Wagner, "A Guide for the Perplexed and a Call to the Wavering: Tian Han's *Guan Hanqing* (1958) and the New Historical Drama" in *The Contemporary Historical Drama* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990).

¹⁸⁴ Chen Sihe, *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue shi* (A history of contemporary Chinese literature) (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1999), 114-116.

Court during the period of the Three Kingdoms. Daughter of an influential official-scholar in the Eastern Han dynasty, Wenji was captured by the Xiongnu Hun invaders and forced to stay married to Prince Zuoxian of the Xiongnu Hun for twelve years. In 208AD, Cao Cao sent envoys to take Wenji back to Han China.

The play opens with the emotional turbulence of Wenji upon returning to the Han court. Saddened by the feelings of leaving her beloved husband and children, she cannot help remain wavering and contradictory over the idea of return. Her husband Prince Zuoxian, angered by the determination of the Chanyu (the chief of the Xiongnu Hun) to send Wenji back, also appears irritable and uncooperative. Not until the legate of the Han, Dong Si, who turns out to be Wenji's childhood friend, tells them that the great minister Cao Cao expects her back to compile her father's incomplete historical work is Wenji convinced to go back to Han China. Her husband also makes good friends with Dong Si. On the way home, Wenji cannot refrain from missing her children, so much so that she stays up late composing poems and playing music to express her sorrow. Sympathetic with her feelings, Dong Si comforts Wenji and encourages her to transfer her energy spent on personal mishap to work for *Tianxia* (all under Heaven). However, out of jealousy, the other legate, Zhou Jin, slanders Dong Si to Cao Cao over Dong's friendship with Prince Zuoxian and his close relationship with Wenji. Infuriated, Cao Cao orders Dong Si to kill himself. Hearing this news, Wenji comes to Cao Cao to explain the whole situation and rescues Dong Si. In the last act, eight years after Wenji has returned from the Xiongnu Hun, her children are brought back to the Han court, suggesting that the Xiongnu and the Han are incorporated into one family. Cao Cao in this circumstance convinces Wenji to marry Dong Si since Prince Zuoxian has died in a battle with the Xianbei (another minority ethnic group).

There are several ways to approach this five-act play. First, the destiny of the intellectuals invites attention. Guo Moruo admitted in the preface to this play that he intended to portray Cai Wenji as the mirror image of the intellectuals, including himself.¹⁸⁵ The transformation of Wenji from a sentimental poetess to a productive historian recording the greatness of the Han Empire parallels the transformation of the modern intellectuals who finally devote themselves to building the socialist country.

Second, the friendly relationship between the Han court and the Xiongnu Hun reflects the modern ethnic policy. Not only does the return of Wenji and eventually of her children back to the Han undo the previous tragedy in the ethnic confrontation, but the decision of the Chanyu to stay in the Han in the end also demonstrates the centering position of the Han in terms of ethnic relations. Unlike the historical plays during the late Qing and the period of the War of Resistance to Japan in which ethnic relations remain ambivalent and contradictory, this play consciously and affirmatively takes a Han-centered perspective to incorporate the minorities into the boundary of China. Instead of barbarizing the minorities, the Xiongnu are portrayed as an understanding and peace-loving group who share the same moral standard as the Han people. For instance, in Act Two, Wenji recalls her being captured by Xiongnu soldiers and rescued by Prince Zuoxian. Prince Zuoxian appears to be a righteous hero who criticizes the moral decay and political turmoil in the Han and finally convinces Wenji to go to the Xiongnu with him. However, after Dong Si tells both Wenji and her husband about the great deeds Cao Cao has accomplished and how peaceful the Han Empire is, Prince Zuoxian's negative attitude toward the Han is completely reversed. He supports Wenji to return to the Han to compile historical works and promises to be cooperative with the Han afterwards. It is noteworthy that Prince Zuoxian's change in

¹⁸⁵ Guo Moruo, *Cai Wenji xu* (Preface to Cai Wenji), written in July 1959. In *Guo Moruo lun chuangzuo* (Guo Moruo talks about creative writing) (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1982), 464. Guo admits that Cai Wenji is the image of himself.

attitude is not due to the Han's military power or diplomatic strategy, but owing to the accomplishment of Cao Cao, who is presented by Guo Si as a humane, capable, and legitimate ruler. Governed by morality, unity is well preserved, with the Han at the center of this political-cultural landscape.

Prince Zuoxian's voluntary submission not only manifests itself in his change of attitude toward Wenji's return to the Han, but also in his will. Before Prince Zuoxian dies, he asks his son to bequeath a mirror, initially from Wenji as a symbol of love, to Guo Si, suggesting that he wishes Guo Si to take care of Wenji. The transfer of the mirror symbolically displays the transfer of Wenji from a Xiongnu husband to a Han husband. Wenji is hence not only re-incorporated into her homeland as a valuable individual, but also re-reunited with a Han husband to create a family as the basic unit of the empire.¹⁸⁶ Wenji's marriage arrangement, therefore, is not just made by Cao Cao, but already determined by Prince Zuoxian, whose wholehearted admiration of the Han builds the moral foundation of the ethnic relations within the empire.

Besides all these aspects, Cao Cao's image is greatly improved in this play. Rather than being an immoral crook emerging out of turbulent times, as represented in history and popular literature like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Cao Cao is portrayed as a widely loved and praised leader who is capable of achieving unification and peace with a farsighted vision. Through Guo Si's depiction, Cao Cao not only cares about the soldiers and the common people, but also initiates several land reforms to improve peasants' life and social stability. His army is called the "army of benevolence and righteousness," only fighting for justice. Even the former enemy, the

¹⁸⁶ In the 1920s, Guo Moruo intended to write a play on Cai Wenji, aiming to portray her as a tragic figure who was betrayed by her Hun (Xiongnu) husband and had to be separate from her children. Guo meant to create such a character to attack the patriarchal, feudal system and advocate the emancipation of women. This play has never been written, yet it is obvious to see that his intention was to emphasize the friction and contradiction taking place in Wenji's life, rather than the unity and harmony manifested in the later play *Cai Wenji*. See Guo Moruo, "Xie zai sange panni de nüxing hounian" (Postscript to *Three rebellious women*), 1926. In *Guo Moruo lun chuanguo* (Guo Moruo discuss creative writing), 360-362.

Wuhuan, are reformed by his moral power so that they become part of his army. Indeed, it is Guo Moruo's intention to "reverse the verdict" (fan'an 翻案) for Cao Cao. In his own words:

I really appreciate Cao Cao's accomplishment. He gradually created social stability during the chaotic period at the end of the Han dynasty. He also restored and developed the order of production in the region of the Huanghe River so that the refugees could enjoy a peaceful and settled life. Although he once fought against the Yellow Turban Rebellion, the Yellow Turban rebels in effect upheld him....In sum, Cao Cao indeed made massive contributions to the people of that era, and he contributed greatly to our national and cultural development.¹⁸⁷

In this light, the justification of Cao Cao starts from his close relationship with the people, then his effective policy to create unity and peace, and finally his contribution to history by means of building a concrete foundation for the reunification of the empire. In Guo's eyes, Cao Cao was a national hero with historical limitation, who was constructed by history and reformed by the people. It is the historical trend (shi 势) that determined his accomplishment since he was the one who was morally qualified and strategically competent to become a legitimate ruler.¹⁸⁸

To reverse Cao Cao's image from the popular negative one to a positive one, Guo particularly emphasized Cao Cao's relationship with the Yellow Turban rebellion. Though Cao Cao built his career on suppressing the Yellow Turban rebellion, Guo argued, he nonetheless was also influenced by the peasant rebels. And it is the interaction with the peasants that later directed him to follow a right path welcomed by the people.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 467.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 467. Guo Moruo points out in the preface that Cao Cao changed his career due to the historical situation. Initially Cao Cao was hoping to be a reclusive scholar, then he thought he could be a great general to glorify his family name. Yet the historical trend (situation 时势) finally determined that he suppressed the powerful local families, refrain land from merging, and became the most powerful minister who accomplished the unification of North China.

Guo's reasoning on cause and effect (he carried out land reform because he was influenced by the rebellion) is questionable, since in doing this, he reversed the temporal order, which diverts from the methodology of historiography. However, it nevertheless reveals Guo's long-established ideal of historical representation. As both a historian and playwright, he distinguished historical research from historical plays by characterizing them as "pursuing authenticity from the facts" (*shi shi qiu shi* 实事求是) and "pursuing the similarity at the expense of the facts" (*shi shi qiu si* 失事求似), respectively. He believed that a historical playwright should be a "concave mirror" in which many historical traces converge and at the same time diverge toward the outside, and in that way he could create a "virtual focus" which is the intersection of history and creativity.¹⁸⁹ In historical research, if some record or evidence is missing, historians have to leave the research with a question mark; yet in literary representation, it is the playwright's obligation to create causation and emplot history. Unlike Hayden White's metahistory which links history with literary emplotment to construct history as a whole sequence of causation,¹⁹⁰ Guo on the contrary contrasted historiography with literary creation. For him, historical research could remain fragmentary due to incomplete records, while historical plays have to be a totality in terms of emplotment.¹⁹¹ The creation of the totality, thus, relies on the "virtual focus," the point of juncture between history and reality.

This "virtual focus," on the surface favors the present over the past, yet it in effect disrupts the temporal order. It does not simply reverse the temporal order by

¹⁸⁹ Guo Moruo, "Lishi, shiju, xianshi" (History, historical plays, and reality), written in 1942. In *Guo Moruo lun chuanguo*, 501.

¹⁹⁰ Hayden White, *Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

¹⁹¹ In fact, here may exist the fundamental difference between traditional Chinese historiography and the western historiography. Charles Gardner suggests that the Chinese traditional historiography more often than not remains fragmentary in terms of causation in historical events, albeit they keep sufficient historical records for it. While the western historiography centers on the causation of events, Chinese traditional historiography centers on individuals with moral judgment. See Charles Gardner, *Chinese Traditional Historiography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938).

projecting the present onto the past, but refracts time by reflecting the projection back from the past to the present. As a result, the totality is by any means the product of the synthesis of the past and present.

In *Cai Wenji*, the “virtual focus” or the totality lies in the centuries-long vision of unity, from a Han-centered point of view. To justify Cao Cao is to justify the winner who established the foundation for reunification during a long period of disunity. People may speculate on the resemblance between Cao Cao and Mao Zedong, given the particular historical context, yet the preference for unity over disunity is a persistent force through Chinese history. As Guo Moruo articulated it in 1941, “desiring unity while detesting disunity is the common wish since the start of the republican era, it is also the common wish of the past generations since the origin of the Chinese history. Inasmuch as it is common to both the past and the present, we can speculate on the past from the present, and borrow the past to mirror the present.”¹⁹² This argument was to explain his imaginative creation in his wartime play *Tangdi zhi hua* (Cherry blossoms—symbol of sibling love). It also provides an interpretation for the common theme in all the historical plays in the modern period. Besides the historical fiction and drama already discussed in the previous section, Guo’s wartime plays, including *Qu Yuan*, *Hufu* (The tiger symbol), and *Tangdi zhi hua* (Cherry Blossoms), all disdain the separatists or traitors in order to represent reality during the War of Resistance to Japan.

It deserves attention that the “reversal of the verdict on Cao Cao” in Guo Moruo’s creation is also through moral justification. By linking Cao Cao with the people, Guo turns Cao Cao into a benevolent and righteous ruler as against his malevolent image in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and other unofficial sources.

¹⁹² Guo Moruo, “Wo zenyang xie *Tangdi zhi hua*” (How I wrote *Cherry Blossoms*) in *Moruo juzuo xuan* (The collection of Guo Moruo’s plays) (Beijing: Remin wenxue chubanshe, 1978), 80.

In his comprehensive study of the historical dramas in this period, Rudolf Wagner continued the tradition of suggestive reading of the plays. He made direct associations between Mao Zedong and the ruling figure in various texts, be it Cao Cao, Kublai Khan, Empress Wu Zetian, or Emperors Qianlong and Wanli.¹⁹³ The multifaceted images of authority in the texts, for Wagner, reflect the different attitudes toward Mao Zedong in reality. As such, there are intertextual dialogues among the historical plays and all these plays closely interact with the contemporary political situation. It is as if Mao Zedong directed his Propaganda Department to produce literary works praising unity and upright spirit yet received multiple products that intended either to flatter or attack him.¹⁹⁴ Closely related to the immediate sociopolitical environment, the historical narratives hence flow from the center and fold back to the center, creating a closed loop which leaves no room for literary autonomy beyond the suggestive interpretation. The problem in this kind of reading is that it collapses the distance between history and the present, rendering the historical representation an actual battlefield directly pointing to specific individuals in the present. It proves to be nothing other than the notoriously allusive tradition during the Cultural Revolution when these historical representations received arbitrary treatment, one that resulted from matching the identities of all the characters in the plays with the real political leaders in the present according to their political positions. For instance, for Wagner, Tian Han's *Guan Hanqing* was a critique of Mao's bureaucratic regime

¹⁹³ Rudolf Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990).

¹⁹⁴ In the late 1950s, it was Mao Zedong who promoted Hai Rui's "daring to keep the truth and daring to speak," which later was characterized as the "Hai Rui Spirit." Therefore, the literary productions about Hai Rui, including Wu Han's *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*, were the direct products of Mao's speech, though the outcomes were tragic for these playwrights. In Wagner's reading, following the interpretation made during the Cultural Revolution, the writers portrayed Hai Rui's story in order to challenge Mao's policy. It is as though Mao called for an attack on himself, and the writers were pretty aware of the risky consequences. Similarly, Guo Moruo wrote about Cao Cao because Mao had praised Cao Cao. So every historical play was the product which could be traced to Mao and folded back to Mao, as if there is no room for literary autonomy beyond suggestive interpretation. See Rudolf Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Drama*, 258-9.

while Mao himself was ignorant of the misdeeds of his bureaucrats; on the other hand, Guo Moruo's *Cai Wenji* sang praise to Mao, suggesting that Mao was Cao Cao. While both seem reasonable in terms of the writers' characters and their popular reputations, a problem still emerges from this abrupt identification. In one sense, Mao never took himself as the equal of the emperors in the past; on the contrary, he saw himself as the modern superior of them since he achieved the people's democracy. In another sense, if writers wanted to flatter Mao, they could have chosen great, successful emperors in history like Emperor Wu in the Han Dynasty or Emperor Taizong in the Tang Dynasty instead of ambiguous figures like Cao Cao and Empress Wu Zetian as Guo Moruo did.¹⁹⁵ If the writers intended to criticize Mao's policy, they could have written about periods of crisis in the past dynasties to ring the alarm bell as they did during wartime.

Perhaps, to answer these questions, we need again to ponder Guo Moruo's theory of the "virtual focus." A "virtual focus" is the juncture between the past and the present which allows difference that reveals the temporal gap. To completely overlap the picture of the past with the picture of the present is to willfully create an "actual focus," which eliminates the historical depth manifested in the open representations. Perhaps, more reasonably, from the playwright's perspective, rather than *positioning* Mao and his regime in history to identify Mao with the past emperors and compare the contemporary commune system with the past land situation, the plays for the most part serve to *situate* the intellectuals, as the representatives of the people, in the newly

¹⁹⁵ As shown in Wagner's study, images of Emperor Qianlong and Emperor Taizong did appear on stage during this period. Yet they were not portrayed as wholly positive emperors. Emperor Qianlong was in a Peking Opera entitled *Da Qianlong* (Trouncing the Qianlong Emperor) staged in Jiangsu province. In this piece, Emperor Qianlong is smacked by a young woman when he is trying to seduce her with his identity hidden in common clothes during his inspection trip to the South. The ending of the opera is that the people teach the emperor a lesson so that he is made fun of and forced into a shameful retreat. Emperor Taizong was also in a Peking Opera *Tangwang na jian* (The Tang Emperor Accepts Remonstrance), in which the upright prime minister Wei Zheng and the empress together teach the emperor a lesson so that he realizes his fault. It is noteworthy that both stories were not new on the opera stage, which usually served as the entertainment for the people. And in both pieces, the emperors are portrayed not as the ultimate heroes; instead, they need to listen to the people or righteous officials to correct their mistakes, as is common in other plays.

founded nation state at a time when the intellectual's status became fragile and ambiguous.¹⁹⁶ The playwrights now identified with cultural heroes like Guan Hanqing, Cai Wenji, or the upright scholar officials like Hai Rui and Xie Yaohuan, as a righteous moral voice confronting and correcting authority.¹⁹⁷ Even Cai Wenji, who is presented as a submissive intellectual who finally sings praise to Cao Cao in her poem, dares to stand up for Dong Si to challenge Cao Cao's mistake, not to mention other upright officials who risk their lives to remonstrate while remaining absolutely loyal to the emperors and the empire. The emperors need them, since they are the transcendent righteous voice with which, and only with which, the empire could maintain unified and prosperous. In this light, the intellectuals were in effect continuing their political function by recovering the imperial legacy. Through the historical representations, the intellectuals attempted to secure a place for themselves while making their voice heard by authority, even though that authority was vaguely defined, as in the wartime period, when the "foreign" was abstractly referred to.

In her study on Guo Moruo in the May Fourth period, Shu-mei Shih made a keen observation that the selective employment of Western universal knowledge (e.g. psychoanalysis) provided the intellectuals (e.g. Guo Moruo) with extra cultural capital, which distinguished them from the masses.¹⁹⁸ Intellectuals like Guo Moruo or Lu Xun could identify themselves as "global humans" (shijie ren),¹⁹⁹ freely choose western theories/concepts to express their desire for modernity and progress, and establish a

¹⁹⁶ Wagner articulated the sensitive area of the intellectual's status during this period in his reading of Tian Han's *Guan Hanqing*. Similar to the Yuan Dynasty, when the literati scholar's social status was low, ranking "ninth" in the social hierarchy, in the contemporary period, the intellectuals were also called "the stinking ninth" (chou lao jiu) during the Cultural Revolution.

¹⁹⁷ Both Tian Han and Guo Moruo had claimed that they identify with their intellectual protagonists, Guan Hanqing and Cai Wenji. Wu Han had stated in the preface to *Hai Rui dismissed from office* that he was "a Hai Rui," and Meng Chao also claimed that "Li Huiniang, that is I; I have given her my heart's blood. I have also given my feelings to Pei (Huiniang's lover, a righteous Confucian student); therefore I am also student Pei." See Wagner. *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*. 312.

¹⁹⁸ Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*. 97.

¹⁹⁹ The term "global humans" (shijie ren) was in Lu Xun's essay No. 36. In *Lu Xun quanji* (The complete works of Lu Xun), Vol.1, 307.

sense of Chinese cosmopolitanism. However, Shih argued, this cosmopolitanism is in nature asymmetrical. Since the third world intellectuals have to know the world (the West) in order to be “cosmopolitan” while the Western intellectuals have no such demand to know the non-West, it is merely another manifestation of a Western-dominated world view.²⁰⁰

Identifying the West as being universal and cosmopolitan, Shih undermined the long-lasting universal thinking embedded in Chinese history and culture. For Shih, the Western universal intervened in the continuity of Chinese history, and thus rendered the Chinese intellectual discourse fragmented and unpredictable. She took Lu Xun and Guo Moruo’s early iconoclastic appearance and their later Marxist turn as intellectual ruptures rather than continuity in their lives. Especially for Guo Moruo, Shih saw no connection between the early cosmopolitan—the aesthetic vanguardist, the pantheist, the champion of art for art’s sake—and the later Marxist ideologue.²⁰¹ As much as I agree with her notion of “asymmetrical cosmopolitanism,” I would suggest that Chinese intellectual thinking manifests a more self-reflexive cosmopolitanism. The interaction with the West constitutes and complements the self-reflexivity rather than completely destroys the continuity. In fact, as discussed in the first chapter, Guo Moruo’s Marxism was far too Chinese compared with the original Marxism, and his vision for the nation could never be strictly contained in the boundary of a modern nation state. The play *Cai Wenji* conveys his ideal blueprint for a country—unity and harmony, which is consistent with his early cosmopolitanism. As early as the 1920s, Guo had promoted his idea of the “supranational” (chao guo jia). In an essay titled “The National and the Supranational” (Guojia de yu chao guojia de, 1923), Guo reasoned, as the nation state had increasingly destroyed individual’s

²⁰⁰ Shu-mei Shin, *The Lure of the Modern*, 97.

²⁰¹ Shu-mei Shin, *The Lure of the Modern*, 98.

freedom, we need to turn to the supranational, which guarantees humaneness, harmony, and peace among nations by erasing the boundaries of the nation states, and which has been ingrained in the traditional Chinese spirit.²⁰² Repeatedly articulating his vision of the cosmopolitan—in his essays, historical plays, and radical reinterpretation of Marxist theories, Guo manifested time and again the traditional way of thinking in building the world order and the position of the intellectuals.

In this regard, it is the imperial-time regime that articulates its pervading voice in the modern period. The over-powering moral regime, surviving through the iconoclastic criticism of its downside of hypocrisy and hierarchy during the enlightenment movement, continually reveals itself in forms of authenticity and democracy in the historical representations, which serves the project of nation building. The individual heroes, emperors and officials alike, nonetheless, have to be inserted into this all-encompassing imperial-moral regime to become performative and inspiring for the present imitators. It is as if history speaks through the present than the other way around.

Peasant rebellion revisited: Yao Xueyin's Li Zicheng

If Guo Moruo's "virtual focus" emphasizes fictional creativity at the intersection of history and literature in order to represent a contingent reality, Yao Xueyin's *Li Zicheng* claims to recover the universal historical truth under the guidance of Marxist historical materialism. Distancing himself from the discursive social reality, under Mao Zedong's direct protection,²⁰³ Yao Xueyin was able to maintain a relatively

²⁰² Wang Xunzhao et al., eds. *Guo Moruo yanjiu ziliao* (Research materials on Guo Moruo) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1986), Vol 1, 147-155, 172-178, 192-194.

²⁰³ In 1966, after the publication of the first volume of the novel, Mao told people who were in charge of the Cultural Revolution to protect Yao Xueyin from the revolutionary campaigns in order to allow him to continue writing the novel *Li Zicheng*. In 1975, feeling that his writing could be discontinued because of the outside Revolution, Yao wrote to Mao Zedong asking for help and received Mao's direct protection. See Nie Hualing. "Qishi niandai de gushi" (The story of the 70s), which is an interview of

quiet environment in which to write *Li Zicheng* and gained success for the novel during and after the Cultural Revolution.

As the first historical novel since the May Fourth period,²⁰⁴ *Li Zicheng* contains five volumes, more than three million words.²⁰⁵ Ambitiously determined, Yao spent almost 40 years to finish this novel. The first volume was published in 1963, the second one in 1977, the third one in 1981, and the last two volumes did not reach the readers until the late 1990s. Over the course of tremendous social change within these 40 years, the novel received dramatically different treatment from its inception to its completion. This is partly due to the loose structure which requires reader's dedication and patience, partly due to socio-political change, which brings about varying spiritual and aesthetic pursuit. Generally speaking, the first two volumes were more successful both in terms of the writing skill and critical reception.²⁰⁶ In 1982, the second volume of this novel was awarded the first "Mao Dun Literature Prize." The prize demonstrates the institutional recognition of the novel in both political and literary senses, and legitimizes the status of the epic narrative on peasant rebellions.²⁰⁷ However, by the 1990s, when the representations of the past emperors gradually emerged and proved more successful, the publication of the last two volumes of *Li Zicheng* generated little interest.

There might be multiple reasons that contribute to this silent reception. First, the huge, comprehensive plan of the novel might have been beyond the writer's capacity. Such encyclopedic writing requires skillful manipulation of knowledge,

Yao Xueyin by Nie Hualing and Paul Engle in 1978. In *Guanyu changpian lishi xiaoshuo Li Zicheng* (About the historical novel *Li Zicheng*) (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi chubanshe, 1979), 335-336.

²⁰⁴ Shen Yanbing (Mao Dun), "Guanyu changpian lishi xiaoshuo *Li Zicheng*" (About the historical novel *Li Zicheng*), in *Guanyu changpian lishi xiaoshuo Li Zicheng*, 158.

²⁰⁵ In fact, it is 3.26 million words. See Wang Aisong, *Zhengshi shuxie yu lishi xushi* (Political writing and historical narrative) (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 2007), 240.

²⁰⁶ Wang Aisong, *Zhengzhi shuxie yu lishi xushi*, 238.

²⁰⁷ Tang Zhesheng, *Zhongguo dangdai tongshu xiaoshuo shilun* (History of Chinese contemporary popular fiction) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2007), 279.

structure, and literary technique, which exhausted Yao's talent and energy, especially in his later age. Second, the writer's method of composing might have impacted the literary value of it. The novel was first produced through the writer's oral recording and later edited by his assistants. Such a method could result in violating the coherence and literariness of the novel. As Liu Zaifu has commented, *Li Zicheng's* literary value keeps deteriorating, one volume after another, which hardly matches reader's expectation.²⁰⁸ Third, and maybe the most important, the image of the peasant rebels is portrayed in such a way that they are idealized, perfected, so much so that it is not clear why they finally failed. "Lady Gao (Li Zicheng's wife) is too high (Gao), and Madam Red (Hong Niangzi) is too red," so the critics say, which makes the novel not as realistic as the author claimed.²⁰⁹ Fourth, and not the least, the political atmosphere in the 1990s was much different from that in the 70s and the 80s. The revolutionary discourse had gradually faded from the public horizon. In a word, Yao Xueyin and his *Li Zicheng*, although successful in the beginning, appeared outdated and untimely in the post-revolutionary society. This, however, has less to do with the specific historical period than with the intrinsic value of literature itself. In this section, we will focus on the first two volumes as they are the very product of the revolutionary discourse in the Maoist era.

Seen by Yan Jiayan as a "social encyclopedia of the transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasties,"²¹⁰ this novel provides a detailed portrait of social life in different social groups. Adopting a panoramic perspective, the novel not only depicts the heroic image of the peasant rebels centered on Li Zicheng, who forced the Ming Emperor Chongzhen to commit suicide and established his own regime before the

²⁰⁸ Liu Zaifu and Liu Xuyuan, "Liu Zaifu tan wenxue yanjiu yu wenxue lunzheng," in *Wenhui yuekan* (Literature monthly), 1988, vol.2. See Wang Aisong, *Zhengzhi shuxie yu lishi xushi*, 238.

²⁰⁹ Tang Zhesheng, *Zhongguo dangdai tongshu xiaoshuo shilun*, 277.

²¹⁰ Yan Jiayan, "Li Zicheng chu tan" (A preliminary discussion of *Li Zicheng*), in *Guanyu changpian lishi xiaoshuo Li Zicheng*, 170.

Manchus conquered Beijing, but also portrays the complicated political struggles within the Ming court.

The first two volumes illustrate the period of the rise of Li Zicheng's rebellion before he overthrew the Ming court. Surviving the extreme difficulty in which his troops were almost exterminated, Li's army develops so rapidly that his success attracts people of all kinds of backgrounds to join the rebellion, including literati counselors such as Niu Jinxing, Song Xiance, Li Yan, and Li Mou.

Unlike A Ying's play *Li Chuangwang* written in 1945, which mainly focuses on the failure of Li Zicheng's regime after he occupied Beijing,²¹¹ the first two volumes of this novel describe the widely-supported, increasingly mature, and deterministically promising rise of Li's rebellion in contrast to the deeply corrupted Ming Court. In A Ying's play, Li Zicheng appears to be a capable yet narrow-minded and suspicious peasant leader who fails to listen to the appropriate suggestion of Li Yan to deal with the complex situation after they have overthrown the Ming. Based on Guo Moruo's study of Li Zicheng,²¹² A Ying in his play described Liu Zongmin, the important peasant general in Li's army, as no more than a short-sighted, greedy, and impertinent rebel whose rough behavior arouses revulsion from both the former Ming officials and the common people. Moreover, he keeps the famous beauty Chen Yuanyuan, favorite concubine of the important Ming general Wu Sangui, which infuriates Wu into surrendering to the Qing and directly leads to the peasant regime's final defeat. Should Li Zicheng have listened to Li Yan's advice to discipline his subordinates and tactfully cope with the former Ming officials, the destiny of this great peasant rebellion might have been different.

²¹¹ A Ying, *Li Chuangwang*. In *A Ying quanji* (the complete anthology of A Ying) (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe), Vol 10.

²¹² A Ying acknowledges that this play was written according to Guo Moruo's essay "Jiashen sanbai nian ji" (A memorial essay on year Jiashen/1644 three hundred years later). A Ying, "Li Chuangwang bianyan jishi" (About the play *Li Chuangwang*). See *A Ying quanji*, Vol 10, 557.

A Ying's play, written at a time when the CCP (the Communist Party) and the Communist New Fourth Army developed tremendously during the War of Resistance to Japan and prepared to enter the civil war with the Nationalist Party, aimed to educate the CCP party cadres to keep alert of the complicated situation they would face when advancing from the countryside into the cities.²¹³ Dramatizing the limitation of the peasant class, the play in effect calls to mind the crucial importance of intellectuals in guiding the correct path of revolution.

Contrary to Guo Moruo's research and A Ying's literary adaptation, Yao Xueyin reversed Liu Zongmin's image and confirmed Li Zicheng's ability to make correct judgment independently based on democratic discussion among the peasant rebels. To Yao, Guo Moruo's research was at any rate biased, for Guo merely relied on insufficient historical records. His lack of rigor and overly subjective attitude blemished the peasant rebel's image to mislead readers.²¹⁴ Moreover, Guo Moruo and A Ying both accentuated the positive function of Li Yan, a literati intellectual raised in a feudal official's family, as a crucial element in determining the destiny of the revolution. However for Yao, to overly emphasize Li Yan's function was to undermine the peasants' intrinsic revolutionary consciousness. The truth should be the opposite: Li Yan never completely betrayed his own class, so that he unavoidably had some negative influence on the rebel group, though he was sympathetic with the people and voluntarily joined the peasant rebellion to contribute his insight.²¹⁵

Indeed, the novel *Li Zicheng* implicitly applies class analysis as the narrative guideline to create typical characters determined by their class background in typical

²¹³ Ibid. 558-9.

²¹⁴ Yao Xueyin, Preface of *Li Zicheng*. In *Guanyu changpian lishi xiaoshuo Li Zicheng*, 283. Note that this comment on Guo's research was deleted in the preface published together with the novel.

²¹⁵ Ibid. 284.

contradictions.²¹⁶ This typicality, though different from the extreme stereotype of the typical figures promoted by the “Gang of Four” during the Cultural Revolution, is itself structured by Marxist-Maoist class struggle discourse defined by formulas for socialist realism.

Taking class analysis as the theoretical paradigm, in which class struggle is seen as the dominant contradiction in a hierarchical society and the people the ultimate force pushing history forward, the novel attributes the fall of the Ming to class contradiction rather than to the Manchu invasion. In fact, the Marxist class analysis is so prevalent that it claims to be the universal perspective transcendent of any historical period and national boundary. For instance, in dealing with the tension between the class contradiction and the ethnic contradiction, Yao created a compound narrative structure by taking the ethnic conflict as the background foil to give prominence to the class conflict.²¹⁷ For Yao, the primary cause that prompted Wu Sangui to surrender to the Qing was not that Liu Zongmin kept Wu’s favorite concubine Chen Yuanyuan, which according to the unofficial historical tales infuriated Wu so greatly that he surrendered to the Qing in order to retaliate against Liu, but that Wu’s class background determined that he could only cooperate with the oppressive class to suppress the peasant regime.²¹⁸ The class structure over-determines the discursive event in the process of important decision making. This structure, according to Yao, not only manifests itself in the late Ming in Emperor Chongzhen’s court, but also in the late Northern Song, late Qing, and Jiang Jieshi’s regime in the modern period. Since these corrupt regimes share the common class interest with the external

²¹⁶ Jiang Xiaotian, “Ping *Li Zicheng*” (On *Li Zicheng*), in *Guanyu changpian lishi xiaoshuo Li Zicheng*, 214.

²¹⁷ Yan Jiayan, “Li Zicheng chu tan” (The immature discussion of *Li Zicheng*), in *Guanyu changpian lishi xiaoshuo Li Zicheng*, 199.

²¹⁸ Yao Xueyin, Preface to *Li Zicheng*, vol.1. In *Li Zicheng* (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1977), 22.

aggressor, they would rather sacrifice the national interest to them in order to first suppress the internal peasant revolution. To formulate it in Jiang Jieshi's famous words: "To counter the foreign one must first pacify the domestic" (rang wai bi xian an nei 攘外必先安内).²¹⁹

This class analysis, on the one hand suggests that the aforementioned regimes are determined to fail since they have lost the foundation to legitimize their rule; on the other hand, nonetheless, it implies a universal tendency beyond the state/ethnic boundary. Class transcends ethnicities and nations. In a manner that is the other side of "internationalism," the ruling class cooperates with each other across national/ethnic borders to suppress the people, and as such, class analysis overlaps with the traditional imperial moral regime to confirm the cyclical pattern of Chinese history. As long as the new regime rectifies its name by alleviating class contradiction, developing social economy, and reclaiming the moral high ground, it could insert itself successfully into the Chinese empire. The so called "traitors," then, might have betrayed their own ethnicity and former authority, but never really betrayed the Chinese Empire. In this sense, the Marxist theory rationalizes the betrayal, rationalizes the entire historical development, even though it condemns as immoral the whole feudal regime since it represented the oppressor's interest.

Indeed, moral judgment never ceases to accompany the rationalization of historical events during the *discursive* representations of empire. The question is not *whether* moral judgment is necessary, but *who* has the morality. Such is the juncture of the traditional imperial-time regime and the modern Marxist theory. As discussed in the prior chapter, with the enlightened *renmin* (the People) replacing the passive *min* (mass, people) as the ultimate holder of morality and unity, *Li Zicheng* not only

²¹⁹ Ibid. 33.

justifies the peasant rebellion, but also reinforces the conception of the unified Chinese Empire.

For instance, in the first volume, Yang Tinglin, the upright official in Emperor Chongzhen's court, articulates his understanding of the Manchus as part of the Chinese Empire:

In the capital city Beijing even three-foot high children know that the area east of the Liaohe River (the northeast), and north to Nuergan, eastward to the sea, belongs to the Chinese territory. It has been that way since the Jin and Yuan dynasties. Whenever it is a time of prosperity, our China is unified and both the Han Chinese and the minorities (Hu) support the same emperor. Since the ancient times, the territory east of the Liaohe River has been a place inhabited by different tribes, who have been the subordinates of the Chinese during Qin, Han, Sui, and Tang dynasties, remaining the same till our Ming dynasty. How can there be a country other than China? (57)

Hearing his words, Lu Xiangsheng, the loyal general who has been advocating fighting against the Manchus and finally dies in battle, extends this argument, demonstrating that the Manchus have always been part of the Chinese Empire since the Zhou dynasty. The invasion of the Manchus is in effect the rebellion of a subordinate tribe rather than the foreign invasion. Hence, it is a shame that the Ming court allows the Manchus to attempt to segregate Chinese territory rather than unify the empire handed down from the ancestors.²²⁰

Perhaps, it was this latent assumption of unity that allowed Yao Xueyin to dramatize class contradiction within the empire, and perhaps, it was the resemblance between Li Zicheng's peasant rebellion and Mao's revolution that induced Mao to support the novel. Mao Zedong used to compare and contrast himself with the former successful emperors in ancient China in his poem "Snow." For Mao, what he was going to accomplish would not only inherit, but also outshine and negate what the

²²⁰ Yao Xueyin, *Li Zicheng*, Vol.1, 56-7.

former emperors had established.²²¹ What emerges from the lines of the poem is the consciousness of time and space, the consciousness that endows the new generation with will and confidence to build a new country on the foundation of the past empires. The beautiful China, embodied on the eternal images of the Great Wall and the Huanghe River, challenges Heaven for its height. Such a splendid landscape of “river and mountain” (jiangshan 江山), a metaphor for the empire, continually calls for the heroes—past emperors like Qin Shihuang, Han Wudi, Tang Taizong, Song Taizu, Genghis Khan, and the contemporary new generation—to protect and improve her beauty. However, past emperors are just “heroes” who belong to the past, while the real “successful figure” (fengliu renwu 风流人物) resides in the present. Mao’s comparing and contrasting his era with the past emperors, applauded by many Chinese intellectuals as the unsurmountable verve ever manifested in a modern individual, not only created the historical continuity of a unified empire, but also implied the fundamental difference initiated by a socialist regime. Between the lines of the poem, there emerges the ambiguous figure that refused to be put in the categories of both the “empire” and the “nation state.”

However, besides Mao Zedong’s confirmation of those great emperors’ accomplishments in his poem, there was no direct, positive portrayal of the past successful emperors in the modern literary representation.²²² It seems that national crisis and class consciousness worked together to force those successful emperors off stage. Not until 1981 did the figure of a great emperor, Tang Taizong, appear on the

²²¹ The poem *Snow* was written in 1936. In the poem, Mao listed the great emperors such as Qin Shihuang, Han Wudi, Tang Taizong, Song Taizu, and Genghis Khan. He implied that the present hero would outshine all these people in history.

²²² Guo Moruo wrote a historical play *Zhu* in 1941, in which he portrayed the first emperor Qin Shihuang as an ugly, cruel, and lascivious figure to mirror Jiang Jieshi. In 1956, he revised this play and changed its title to *Gao Jianli*, in which Qin Shihuang’s image was greatly improved, yet he still remained as a morally questionable figure. In 1960, Guo published the historical play *Wu Zetian*, depicting the only female emperor in Chinese history. Yet Guo’s intention was to “reverse the verdict” for Wu Zetian and took her mainly as a female ruler who was standing with the people.

public horizon, marking the transition to the post-Mao period in historical representations.

The Recovery of “min” in Yan Haiping’s Qin wang Li Shimin (Li Shimin Prince of Qin)

In 1981, Yan Haiping published the ten-act play *Qinwang Li Shimin* (Li Shimin Prince of Qin), paving the way for representing the great emperors of Chinese history.²²³ Nevertheless, rather than a direct depiction of the emperor, this play focuses on his life as an uncrowned prince before he stepped onto the throne. Published at a time when the country needed social stability after the Cultural Revolution, the play stresses the double theme of both the unification of the empire and the support from the people. Repeatedly articulating the emperor’s famous saying that “water can float the ship yet can also overturn the ship,” the play positions itself in the post-Mao transitional period. On the one hand, it continues the Maoist discourse on “the People”; on the other hand, however, the play frees itself from the shadow of the “suggestive literature/history” and openly praises the great (future) emperor in history.²²⁴ Bearing deep concern about the people and the empire, Prince Li Shimin surpasses the emperor and the crown prince in morality, wisdom, and performance, so much so that he wins the support of the righteous officials in the court and the common people outside the court, which gives him the ultimate legitimacy to take the throne.

²²³ Yan Haiping, *Qin Wang Li Shimin* (The Prince of Qin Li Shimin). The play was first published in the literary journal *Zhongshan* in 1981. See *Zhongshan*, (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1981), Vol. 1, 6-60.

²²⁴ Dong Jian, “Lishi zhenshi, yishu zhenshi he xianshi qingxiangxing de tongyi—ping lishiju Qinwang Li Shimin” (The unity of historical truth, artistic truth, and contemporary realistic tendency—on the historical play *The Prince of Qin Li Shimin*), in Dong Jian, *Wenxue yu lishi* (Literature and history) (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1992), 256. Also see Gu Ertan, “Rencai nande—du huaju *Qinwang Li Shimin* you gan” (The talent of one in a thousand—some thoughts on play *The Prince of Qin Li Shimin*), in *Zhongshan*, 1981, Vol. 1, 63.

Besides the tense, convoluted plot and the vivid use of theatrical language, which caught the attention of the critics,²²⁵ the historical consciousness about the empire and the people woven in dialogues and poems throughout the play endows the play with a transcendent flavor spilling over the specific historical circumstances. More than just portraying Li Shimin and the court struggle, the play conveys the imperial-time regime that enfolds Li Shimin and his imperial family to be evaluated according to the historical trend. For instance, the theme song, which introduces the protagonist Li Shimin and sets the tone for the entire play, articulates the historical consciousness concerning the relationship between the people and the empire. It reads as such:

The Yellow River flows east,
For centuries its waves have washed the sands;
Floating and capsizing the ship of the state,
How many are aware of this in the rise and fall of empires? (7)

Borrowing the metaphor of river and ship, the image of the Yellow River signifies the history of the Chinese empire. The individuals, the dynasties, are like sands washed out in the current of history, while the secret of the rise and fall was both concealed and revealed in these sands. The relationship between the river and the ship and between history and the present is most clearly articulated in Li Shimin's remonstrance to his father:

Your Majesty! King Wu of Zhou has said, "What Heaven sees is what the people see; what Heaven hears is what the people hear!" Duke Mu of Qin has said, "The people (*min*) are the foundation of the state; only when the foundation is stable does the state remain peaceful." There has been the saying "to pursue the Way for the people (*min*)" since the ancient times! Father! The common people are like the Yangtze and Huanghe rivers, and the emperors are

²²⁵ Gu Ertan, "Rencai nande—du huaju *Qinwang Li Shimin* you gan" (The talent of one in a thousand—some thoughts on play *The Prince of Qin Li Shimin*), in *Zhongshan*, 1981, Vol. 1, 61.

like the giant ships on the water. The river can float the ship; it can also overturn the ship! (43)

Quoting King Wu of Zhou and Duke Mu of Qin, the successful rulers in ancient times, Li Shimin not only compresses the temporal gap between the present and the past, but also elicits the transcendent rule—to pursue the Way for the people—for a prosperous state. Needless to say, such a statement delivered a significant message in the post-Mao era for the legitimacy of the Party-state, with a self-reflexive, all-encompassing historical consciousness. As Dong Jian suggested, this play digs out “the not-yet-past content of history” for the present.²²⁶

Conclusion: the Staging of the Empire

Thus far, it ought to be clear that throughout modern Chinese history, representations of imperial history have always been inextricably intertwined and interlocked with the project of nation building toward modernization. Symptomatic of specific social circumstances, historical representations embody the creative agency that the writers adopted to manipulate history in order to mirror and define reality; however over time, the ambivalence and the discrepancies among the representations not only exhibit the self-negation of the human agency, but also give rise to the all-encompassing temporal paradigm in which the imperial-time regime manifests its transcendent, penetrating power.

In this regard, borrowing Guo Moruo’s understanding that each historical play is a “totality,” there are different “totalities” due to different historical contexts. The common theme of unity and morality, hence, makes itself implicit as the transcendent

²²⁶ Dong Jian, “Lishi zhenshi, yishu zhenshi he xianshi qingxiangxing de tongyi—ping lishiju Qinwang Li Shimin” (The unity of historical truth, artistic truth, and contemporary realistic tendency—on the historical play *The Prince of Qin Li Shimin*), in Dong Jian, *Wenxue yu lishi* (Literature and history) (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1992), 256.

totality in all these discursively constructed totalities, through time. The Chinese empire under represented, therefore, manifests itself as both One and Multiple.

The relationship between One and Multiple evolves from Deleuze's reading of Leibniz. Deleuze suggests that Leibniz's One-Multiple philosophy can be perceived as the allegory of the world.²²⁷ For Deleuze, there is always "a unity *of* the multiple, in the objective sense, the one must also have a multiplicity 'of' one and a unity 'of' the multiple, but now in a subjective sense."²²⁸ This relationship between the One and the Multiple, non-dialectical and non-oppositional as such, nevertheless displays the characteristic of the imperial-time regime: the dispersing character of the One and the collective character of the Multiple. In the objective sense, there is this Chinese Empire which is the unity of the multiple; on the other hand, in a subjective sense, this empire is the "multiplicity of one and a unity of the multiple." The latter "unity," instead of being petrified in the space of the past, nonetheless registers in time. Traveling across time and space through metamorphosis, it continually articulates an infiltrating persistence to be instrumental for its self-perpetuation.

The Chinese Empire, in this sense, far from being a stage of history, is still staging in the modern cultural landscape, constantly unfolding its surplus value in the cultural production.

²²⁷ According to Leibniz, there is always a process of transforming the perceptible object into an individual point of view. The object itself contains a series of figures and aspects which are assigned with definitions and propositions, and finally reaches a single point of view—"a principle of indiscernibles assuring the interiority of the concept and the individual." See Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 126.

²²⁸ Ibid. 126

PART III

PART III—PREFACE

From “the People” to “Tianxia”: The resurgence of the empire in post-revolutionary representation

The history of empire is far too important to be face-value. The rise and fall of empires to a great extent determines which values and ideologies will dominate an era. The study of empire says much about the contemporary global order, its origins, its moral and political bases, and the manner in which it may evolve.

---- Dominic Lieven *Empire*

“Toward the Republic” and toward the empire

In 2003, Channel One of CCTV (China Central Television) during primetime broadcast the TV series *Zouxiang gonghe* (Marching towards the Republic),²²⁹ grabbing people’s attention with its controversial and subversive portrayal of late imperial history. The series restages the turbulent transition from the late Qing to the Republican period, immerses the conservatives, the reformists, and the revolutionaries into the same hot water of this shameful period, and poses a provocative challenge to the officially established view on modern Chinese history.²³⁰

Unlike the mainstream opinion that has been taught in history textbooks that the feudal regime, the decadent imperial family and officials, are the primary reason that China was held back, the series almost completely inverts the images of the “corrupt” Empress Dowager Cixi, the “quisling” official Li Hongzhang, and the “national robber” Yuan Shikai. It suggests that these people have been the scapegoats for the national stigma in history and that in reality they were no less patriotic than those reformists and revolutionaries. Indeed, Cixi appears to be wise, sober, intelligent,

²²⁹ *Zouxiang gonghe* (Marching towards the Republic). Directed by Zhang Li, written by Sheng Heyi and Zhang Jianwei. (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2003).

²³⁰ Ibid. See the interview with the director Zhang Li and the scriptwriter Sheng Heyi.

and strategic, no less open-minded than the situation allows her to be; Li Hongzhang is extremely loyal, diligent, and self-sacrificing, yet has no alternative options to choose from. Similarly, Yuan Shikai becomes a man who is talented, capable, realistic, and far-sighted, only to be trapped by the dream of being an emperor fueled by the conservatives. In a word, these commonly-regarded “historical criminals” seem to be understandable and reasonable due to the situations they were in, and they appear as no less than forerunners in seeking the way to save China during its crisis. On the other hand, Sun Zhongshan (Dr. Sun Yat-sen) is portrayed as an idealistic, enthusiastic, easily-tempted revolutionary, who is no more rational than the reformists, no more realistic than the conservatives. Sun, as a representative of the people, does not seem more heroic than any of the other characters. On the contrary, Cixi, Li Hongzhang, and Yuan Shikai are all charming and capable figures. Their endeavor to save the Qing Empire (and Yuan’s attempt to establish a new dynasty) fails not because of their character flaws, but because they lack the vision to recognize the historical trend. Similarly, the steadfast believer in constitutional monarchy, reformist Kang Youwei, could not accomplish his blueprint also owing to his lack of vision of the people’s power and their demand for democracy. As a result, the success of revolution overthrowing the Qing is presented as more of an outcome of historical inevitability discursively shouldered by Sun than a real break from centuries of the imperial system. The process of moving toward the Republic, hence, appears not so much as social progress led by national heroes than it does a grassroots movement determined by the larger historical trend.²³¹ The end of the Qing dynasty, then, seems to be no more than a discursive change in Chinese history, and the boundary between the late imperial regime and the modern republican state is blurred.

²³¹ Ying Zhu, *Television in Post-Reform China: Serial Dramas, Confucian Leadership and the Global Television Market* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), 50.

Such an attempt to rewrite history, no doubt, not only attracted a well-educated audience, but also invited intensive debate among the cultural elite. A survey conducted by CCTV at the time reveals its popularity among well-educated males between the ages of 30 and 49.²³² Critics who were skeptical about the show accused this series of confusing class boundaries and misleading historical perspective, suggesting that it would misinform the audience with deceptive historical knowledge.²³³ On the other hand, critics who were in favor of the show believed that it would provide a fresh perspective to look at history as well as contemporary Chinese policy.²³⁴

In her study of this TV series, Ying Zhu pointed out that the show followed the trend of revisionist representation of imperial history, defined as endorsing both a neo-authoritarian view on a stronger central government and a more egalitarian society. Zhu argued that even though on the surface *Republic* is at odds with the neo-authoritarian vision on a stronger central government, it promotes the grassroots pursuit for democracy, which is consistent with the neo-authoritarian vision.²³⁵

²³² An online report. “*Zouxiong gongge* guanzhong san gao: xueli gao, shouru gao, nianling gao” (Three characteristics of the audiences for *Marching towards the Republic*: higher education, high income, and older in age). Published in *Hong wang, Xiaoxiang chenbao* (Xiaoxiang Morning Post), online on www.Sina.com.cn on May 19, 2003. See <http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/2003-05-19/1026150077.html>.

²³³ Zhang Haipeng, “Dianshiju *Zouxiong gonghe* yinqi guanzhong lishi zhishi de cuoluan” (TV series *Marching towards the Republic* engenders confusion over historical knowledge) in *Zhongguo jingjishi luntan* (China Economic History Forum), June 17, 2003. See <http://economy.guoxue.com/article.php/1059> Accessed October 24, 2004. Also see Xie Junmei, Li Miaogen, Hua Qiang, Ma Honglin, and Shen Weibin, “Haishang shixuejia dianping *Zouxiong gonghe* lishi renwu” (Shanghai historians comment on historical characters in *Marching towards the Republic*.) in *Zhongguo jingjishi luntan* (China Economic History Forum), May 22, 2003. See <http://economy.guoxue.com/article.php/866> Accessed October 24, 2004.

²³⁴ See the interview with director Zhang Li, “*Zouxiong gonghe* shi bu guandian xi” (TV drama *Marching towards the Republic* is a show of new point of view) In *Renmin wang*, [www.people.com.cn](http://www.people.com.cn/GB/wenju/223/8821/8822/20030429/981941.html). <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/wenju/223/8821/8822/20030429/981941.html>. See also the historians’ discussion in “*Xinmin Zhoukan zhuanfang*: shijia pingshuo *Zouxiong gonghe*” (A special interview conducted by *Xinmin Weekly*: historians talk about *Marching towards the Republic*), first published in *Xinmin Weekly*, May 16, 2003. See <http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/2003-05-19/1026150077.html>. For a more comprehensive collection of web pages on discussions about *Marching towards the Republic*, see *Zhongguo jingcai wangzhi* (Chinese excellent web pages) at www.5566.net, see <http://www.5566.net/tvj/892.htm>.

²³⁵ Ying Zhu, *Television in Post-Reform China*, 50.

However, Zhu did not comment on the mysterious ban of the show after its speedy screening. First being promoted on CCTV, the most politically and ideologically supervised TV station, the series was scheduled to air on CCTV-1 in early April, with two episodes being screened at primetime every night. In the meantime, CCTV also programmed daily reruns on its drama channel CCTV-8. Shortly after it began, without any announcement, CCTV increased its pace to three episodes per evening. Anticipating a ban from the central government due to the unexpected debate on historical controversies, CCTV finished the first run within a month, just before the ban finally came down. After its appearance on CCTV, the show was never shown again in any other TV channel in China, even though video copies were openly available in video stores.²³⁶ The exact reason for the ban remains unknown, yet one thing is self-evident: the government is ambivalent about rewriting modern Chinese history. On the one hand, rewriting is tolerated, even promoted; yet on the other hand, toleration is not without limits. To what extent, and in what area history could be rewritten is still a sensitive space where different social forces contend.

By the time *Republic* was broadcast, historical representations had experienced tremendous change, as will be demonstrated below, from “revolutionary narrative” to “empire representation.” As much as the “empire representation” is tolerated and encouraged, *Republic* might have incongruously reached a threshold for toleration. In other words, while some characteristics of this series won applause in contemporary society, which led to its public appearance in the first place, some aspects of it touched upon a controversial area that pushed a warning button in the government. What, to be speculative, is this button or threshold, then?

²³⁶ Ibid. 43.

The series is fundamentally about *legitimation*. It portrays a gray zone where every party finds its legitimacy in a complicated empirical situation. On the one hand, it restores the continuity of Chinese history, visualizing that troublesome period in which it is virtually impossible to distinguish clearly republican history from imperial history. On the other hand, every party has legitimacy in searching for a way to save China, which might potentially challenge the sole legitimacy of the Communist Party that claimed to have inherited the revolutionary tradition from Sun Zhongshan. As much as the Party likes to obscure revolutionary ideology and recover historical continuity, any potential threat to its legitimacy, from whatever direction,²³⁷ is still unbearable. Moreover, inasmuch as *Republic* manifests the contradiction between an authoritarian government and mass democracy, and the tension between political and economic reform (the Qing court finally endorsed the reform in economic, social levels, yet it is commonly believed that its political regime blocked China's path toward modernity and democracy), the government cannot afford to allow the audience to identify the late Qing court with the contemporary government.²³⁸

Setting aside the threshold of political censorship, the initial promotion of the TV series nonetheless perfectly completed a change in the field of historical representation that had been in place since the mid-1980s. The subversive portrayal of different characters signifies the shift of attention from the idealistic blueprint to the empirical situation, from revolutionary discourse to “empire representation,” and from modernization to globalization. *Republic* offers a major example to show these shifts

²³⁷ Some people speculate that the Party is afraid of being compared with the late Qing government. Since the late Qing court finally decided to carry out economic reform, rather than political reform, just as the contemporary government is doing, the image of this reality might seem to be a criticism to the contemporary policy.

²³⁸ For instance, Xing Haonian linked the late Qing self-strengthening movement led by Li Hongzhang and Zhang Zhidong and the breakdown of the “Hundred-Day Reform” in 1898 with Deng Xiaoping’s economic policy and the Tiananmen Incident in 1989. See Ying Zhu, *Television in Post-Reform China*, 55-6.

and tensions. Insofar as the empirical situation becomes the primary concern in carrying out the national strategy, Sun Zhongshan's idealistic enthusiasm seems not much nobler than the realistic calculation of Li Hongzhang for the sake of the falling empire. Following Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic "black cat, white cat" theory, the post-revolutionary discourse tends to desublimize idealism and endorse practicality. While revolutionary history has faded, imperial history is brought to the fore; while the black-and-white world is blurred, the gray area is legitimized, presented, and brought to the surface on both the national and global horizons.

The transition: the shift from the people's culture to the mass culture

Witnessing the tremendous social change in the last two decades of the twentieth century, the post-revolutionary cultural landscape exhibits diversified literary products corresponding with multifaceted social phenomena. In the field of imperial historical representation, critics observed the shift from "revolutionary narrative" to "empire representation," implying that the representations of peasant rebellions gave way to the representations of the prosperous dynasties in the past, and event-centered history gave way to character-centered history.²³⁹

Following Yao Xueyin's *Li Zicheng*, till the mid 1980s, a large number of historical novels on peasant rebellions were published. Among them were Feng Jicai's *Yi he quan* on the Boxer Rebellion, Ling Li's *Xing xing cao* on the Nian minority revolt in the Qing Dynasty, Liu Yazhou's *Chen Sheng* on Chen Sheng's uprising at the end of the Qin Dynasty, Guo Candong's *Huang Chao* on the peasant insurrection by the end of the Tang Dynasty, Li Yuewu's *Fang La qiyi* on Fang La's rise in the Song Dynasty, and Jiang Weiming's *Bailian nüjie* on the White Lotus unrest, and so on.

²³⁹ Wang Aisong, *Zhengzhi shuxie yu lishi xushi* (Political writing and historical narrative) (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 2007), 277.

Though these novels appeared publicly in the 1980s, they were mostly conceived and written during the Cultural Revolution.²⁴⁰ Whereas the writers were seeking a psychological refuge in historical writing to avoid the intense political environment around them, they were also influenced by the revolutionary master narrative at that time. In the Maoist historical view, peasant rebellions were considered as the irreversible force to push history forward.²⁴¹ Progress was tied with class struggle in which “the People” are the ultimate carrier of morality and historical force. Therefore, the peasant leaders in those uprisings were seen as righteous heroes fighting against oppressors who blocked the historical wheel of progress. In the desire to construct historical epics portraying peasant rebellions, these novels mostly take the perspective of social class to depict a black and white world, at the cost of overly glorifying the peasant heroes and demeaning the imperial ruling class. In a sincere self-reflection, Ling Li later commented that *Xing xing cao* was a product of her subjective limitation and the longstanding leftist tendency in literary creation. “The reason [for the flaw of *Xing xing cao*] is,” she wrote, “subjectively, because I idealized the peasant heroes, trying to endow the protagonists with all kinds of great virtues and sing praise of their mountain-shaking heroic spirit, I could not afford to write about their mistakes and flaws. Objectively, the longstanding extreme-leftist thoughts, and the mentalist view and method in creating the ‘lofty, great, and perfect’ [gao da quan 高大全] model characters also impacted me, so much so that I could not break out of the fetters and the frame (of the model), manifesting my own historical limitations.”²⁴²

²⁴⁰ Ibid.232.

²⁴¹ Mao Zedong articulated the importance of peasant rebellions in Chinese history in his article “Zhongguo geming he Zhongguo Gongchandang” (The Chinese revolution and the Chinese Communist Party). He said, “The scale of the peasant rebellions and peasant wars in Chinese history finds no match in world history. In the Chinese feudal society, only this kind of class struggle [between peasants and landowners], peasant rebellions and peasant wars were the real force of historical development.” In *Mao Zedong xuanji* (Selected works of Mao Zedong), vol 2.

²⁴² Ling Li, “Cong *Xing xing cao* dao *Shaonian tianzi* de chuanguozuo fansi” (Reflecting on the writing from *Xing xing cao* to *Shaonian tianzi*) in *Duo qing wu* (Beijing, Jingji ribao chubanshe, 1998), 5.

Such an idealistic portrait of revolutionary history was soon replaced by the resurgence of “empire representations.” Peasant rebellions faded, yet emperors, empresses, ministers, powerful officials, and successful merchants appeared; the grand narratives of collective heroes were silenced, yet the individual imperial heroes were seen and heard; the discourses of “the people” and Communism were latent, yet the discourse of “Tianxia” (all under Heaven) was rearticulated. Indeed, since the late 1980s till the turn of the twentieth first century, historical narratives and historical images about past Chinese empires nearly dominated cultural production, making a primary contribution to the social visibility. A lot of literature, including novels, biographies, films, and television series devoted themselves to the lives of emperors, empresses, powerful officials, legendary scholars, controversial beauties, and the time periods when the Chinese empire proudly assumed the role of “Central Kingdom” in the world. Almost all the mighty dynasties in imperial China—the Qin, Han, Tang, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties and their associated influential emperors—were covered to shower the audience with convoluted stories and splendid images. The term “Empire,” after nearly a century’s exile, also returned to the public horizon to capture the national imagination of its past glory.

Needless to say, the representations of the Chinese empire and imperial history go far beyond the portrayals in the historical records. Some were openly promoted as fantasy representations, ones that are explicitly entitled with “*xi shuo*” (dramatic narration) or primarily developed from the unofficial anecdotes, such as the TV series *Xi shuo Qianlong* (Dramatic representation of Emperor Qianlong) or *Huanzhu gege* (Princess Pearl). Others, on the other hand, have assumed a position of legitimacy in representing history, declaring themselves to be the products of comprehensive research and a serious attempt to recover history. For instance, Ling Li and Eryuehe’s historical novels and the associated TV series have been regarded as “serious” ones. In

fact, no matter how serious and how faithful to history the producers claimed their works to be, contemporary imagination inevitably played a crucial role in constructing and visualizing history. Especially in the visual productions, cinematic devices, high-tech visual effects, and the dramatic plots turned the imperial images into highly embellished and reception-oriented cultural shows. Hence, the boundary between seriousness and non-seriousness is not that clear-cut. Rather, all these representations together make up the totality of the “empire representation,” and what emerges from the self-assigned categories goes beyond the producers’ intention and manifests the performativity of representation itself.

The cross-fertilization of “empire narrative” and mass media delivers a sense of glory, unity, beauty, and abundance, which significantly diverges from the revolutionary cultural tapestry a decade before. Tang Zhesheng characterizes this shift from revolutionary narrative to “empire representation” as the shift from “People’s culture” (*qun zhong wenhua* 群众文化) to “mass culture,” (*da zhong wenhua* 大众文化), for the elite-led, idealistic pursuit in “People’s culture” gave way to the popular interests of “mass culture,” and the market played a crucial role in propagating the imperial stories and images.²⁴³ While “the People” indexes a class-conscious, clearly demarcated, black-and-white world, “the mass” signifies the gray zone in which class struggle is disguised and blurred. According to critic Wang Aisong, the resurgence of the imperial narrative indicates that the ordinary people were moved off stage and the historical celebrities reappeared on the stage. Moreover, event-centered history gave way to character-centered history.²⁴⁴ In the latter, there is a tendency to glorify the emperors, officials, and successful merchants, dramatizing the romantic encounters

²⁴³ Tang Zhesheng, *Zhongguo dangdai tongsu xiaoshuo shilu* (The history of contemporary Chinese popular fiction) (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007), 300-309.

²⁴⁴ Wang Aisong, *Zhengzhi shuxie yu lishi xushi*, 285.

and power intrigues, which points to the commercialized, vulgar direction of both production and consumption.²⁴⁵

The interplay between modernization and globalization

The subtle shift from “the people’s culture” to “mass culture” goes hand in hand with the swing of public language and national imagination. Coinciding with the intensification of the market economy within China and worldwide globalization, this literary phenomenon signifies the discursive address of “Empire” situated between two overlapping yet different discourses: China’s continued modernization and its ambivalent incorporation into globalization under the rubric of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” To be sure, modernization and globalization are not contradictory discourses. The post-revolutionary slogans “reform and openness,” or “harmony and development,” contain both elements. To some extent modernization is the end, while globalization is the means. Considering the Maoist ideological heritage of the past and contemporary discourse, the former signifies a closed policy, the latter advocates open-door strategy; the former denotes competition, the latter connotes cooperation; the former stresses the worldview of scarcity, implying the win-lose battle against the West in national development, the latter emphasizes the worldview of abundance suggesting the win-win result in the global arena.

The negotiation and the shifting emphases between these two discourses, manifesting the central government’s political and rhetorical strategies in dealing with the post-revolutionary era, find their best cultural artifact in the narratives of the historical empire. In one sense, empire narrative implies the shifting of gears, the invisible negation of the revolutionary discourse; in another sense, nevertheless, it

²⁴⁵ Ma Zhenfang, *Zai lishi yu xugou zhijian* (Between history and fiction) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2006).

crosses the national boundary, responsive to the worldwide attention to redefining empire in the new world order under globalization²⁴⁶ and the Chinese anxiety to resituate its position in the contemporary world.

In this context, the reemergence of the Chinese Empire in popular culture serves to dramatize the confrontation between the present and the past, between China and the West, between the symbolic and political, economic power, and between the national morality (as repeatedly manifested in the rhetoric “Tianxia”) and being a global superpower.

The characteristics of the empire narrative

Inasmuch as the “empire narrative” corresponds to a globalized mass culture, it first of all manifests the at once centralizing and de-centering tendencies that reveal the centripetal and centrifugal forces that “the imperial-time regime” unfolds throughout history.

Characteristic 1: The dialectic between “the People are missing” and Emperors as heroes

On the surface, the commercialization of imperial history desublimates a lofty, idealistic revolutionary history which aims to construct a unified class memory. “The People are missing.”²⁴⁷ Yet paradoxically, “the People” constructed in the revolutionary textual world in effect are always in opposition with the enemy—the ruling class, and to read it contextually, “the nation” in this discourse is always in competition with other nations in the world. The unity achieved in the revolutionary

²⁴⁶ For instance, *Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2000); and *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* by Peter J. Katzenstein (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2005) For a Chinese American scholar’s attention on this topic, see *Clash of Empires* by Lydia H. Liu (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004)

²⁴⁷ Gilles Deleuze, “One Less Manifesto” in *Mimesis, Masochism, & Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, ed. Timothy Murray, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997).

master narrative therefore implies intrinsic disunity from both within and without. By contrast, the commercialized mass culture reconstructs the stories from the remote collective memory embodied in famous historical figures to glorify the unified, wealthy empire, which ironically arouses the national imagination to centralization. For instance, Ling Li's series of novels on the early Qing dynasty was named as "One hundred years of resplendence" (*bai nian hui huang* 百年辉煌) to depict the rising Qing Empire, and Eeryuehe's similar series was titled "The trilogy of the evening glow" (*luo xia san bu qu* 落霞三部曲) to portray the splendid greatness of the Qing Empire at its height. The concentrated portrayal of imperial glory comes across as natural and harmonious, perceivable in both the past and the present, engendering a positive feeling of common root and collective belonging.

Moreover, the dilemma between the absence of the People and the presence of the emperors is resolved in the rhetoric of "Tianxia" (all under Heaven) or "Minxin-Tianxia" (Whoever gains the heart of people will rule all under Heaven). Put another way, even though on the surface "the People are missing," the discourse of "Tianxia" has blended the spirit of the people with the very image of the heroes. It is noteworthy that this "People" is different from the ancient notion "min." Far from being ignorant and passive as "min" connotes, "the People" has inherited the intensive revolutionary legacy in modern China which is deeply rooted in the national consciousness. Just as the aforementioned criticism shows, the cautious voice of the critics signifies the engrained revolutionary consciousness that is still awake in the contemporary period. The displacement of "the People" with "Tianxia," hence, primarily serves to bridge the continuity between the pre-modern empire and the modern nation state, mend the class opposition between the despot and the people, and bring to the surface a vision of harmony and abundance.

Indeed, in terms of the image of the ruling heroes, emperors and officials alike, there is a primary concern that the heroes are not fundamentally different from the common people. By contrast, there is a strong tendency to deny the longstanding assumption in modern history, that the emperor has unlimited imperial power and stands in opposition to the people. In the historical representations, far from being free and authoritative with absolute power, the emperors are usually situated in a critical situation facing multiple threats. As the late Qing court portrayed in *Republic*, the empirical situation determines that the ruling class has no more alternatives than other people to save the empire. Instead of being a totalitarian, transcendent ruler, the emperor has to deal carefully with the crucial situation he is in while bearing *Tianxia* in his mind. Whereas the failed emperors could not shoulder the mission for lack of ability or vision, like the late Qing rulers, the successful ones become the heroes with superb talent, wisdom, vision, and ability. The emphasis on the empirical situation not only erases the distance between the emperor and the common people, but also lifts the notion of “Tianxia” to a transcendent, lofty level. “Tianxia” is absent, yet also omnipresent. As such, “empire representation” manifests itself as the centralizing force organized by the “imperial-time regime.”

Characteristic 2: The dialectic between the centralizing and de-centering effects

Besides the centralizing portrayal of the emperors, on the other hand, the imagination of the empire was reified in the images of wealth, beauty, romance, and success that are also attractive to the individual viewer. The symbiosis between historical representation and mass media, hence, not only contributes to the collective national imagination, but also caters to the popular desire to achieve the ideal success in both spiritual and material senses. The material abundance, including simultaneous possession of wealth, beauty, and fame, is built upon the culturally rich “mellowness”

that suggests the possibilities of maximal gain and cultivates materialist motivation in a commercialized, post-revolutionary social context. For instance, the representations of the famous merchants Fan Li and Lü Buwei in the Warring States period deliberately lead the readers to the “open sesame of their grand success.”²⁴⁸ In that sense, historical narrative incites multiple desires and identifications that are not always lofty and noble, promoting an egocentric, acquisitive response toward an otherwise unitary cultural text.

However, in most cases, the characteristics that contribute to a character’s success are not just tactics and chance, but mostly the traditional virtues and values those characters possess. As discursive and contingent as the social encounters altering personal fate are, the underlying factor that determines the growth of a hero is traditional morality. As Tang Zhesheng pointed out, though these historical representations adopt a non-elitist, less spiritual perspective, the glorified protagonists usually manifest superhuman-like charisma in a highly praised Confucian culture. Thus, the Emperor Yongzheng becomes the advocate of traditional values and the real practitioner of the view of “Minxin-Tianxia”; the official Zeng Guofan is portrayed as first and foremost a prominent Confucian scholar; and the successful merchant Hu Xueyan also possesses qualities comparable to those of a Confucian *shi*-scholar.²⁴⁹ Whereas material success is what attracts popular attention, the larger-than-life spiritual pursuit and the Confucian social conscience is the cultural core that defines their personality. The construct of an ideal character is thus centered on the traditional

²⁴⁸ Han Yaoqi, *Juedai zhengshang Lü Buwei* (The unprecedented politician- merchant Lü Buwei) (Beijing: Guoji wenhua chuban gongsi, 1996); Xie Shijun, *Shangsheng—Fan Li quanzhuan* (The Merchant saint—the grand biography of Fan Li) (Beijing: Beifang wenyi chubanshe, 1997). See Tang Zhesheng, *Zhongguo dangdai tongshu xiaoshuo shilun*, 332.

²⁴⁹ Tang Zhesheng, *Zhongguo dangdai tongshu xiaoshuo shilun*. 314-339. Zeng Guofan in Tang Haoming, *Zeng Guofan* (Changsha: Hunan wenyi chubanshe, 1990); Hu Xueyan in Gao Yang, *Hu Xueyan quanzhuan* (The grand biography of Hu Xueyan) (Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chuban gongsi, 1992); Emperor Yongzheng in Eryuehe, *Yongzheng huangdi* (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 1998).

values by which the protagonists shine through history and on which the empire was founded and stabilized itself.

The centrality of traditional culture as well as imperial thinking and commercialized images constitute both the centralizing and de-centering effects of the representations of empire. In the meanwhile, besides the more conventional historical representations based on historical record, the representations of empire are also accompanied by the “alternative history” that is from an individual or minority perspective. Su Tong’s *Wu Zetian* and *Wo de diwang shengya* (My Lifetime as Emperor), and Wang Anyi’s *Jishi yu xugou* (Fact and Fiction) belong to the latter category.²⁵⁰ Following the literary trend of the new historical fiction, a loosely defined category that often refers to the alternative representation of the Republican era from a non-official perspective,²⁵¹ these novels offer an individual, minority angle to present imperial history that is fictive or outside the official historical record. Chen Sihe defined this non-official perspective as a *minjian* perspective, which exhibits a more diversified, fragmentary, plural memory as against the official, unified history.²⁵²

However, what is behind this individuated, de-centering shard of memory is the unity against which the fragments of history become meaningful. Without the underlying, unified image of the Empire the private, individual narrative of history will lose fundamental reference. For instance, Su Tong’s *Wo de di wang shengya* presents an ahistorical, timeless story of a nameless emperor’s life, one that attempts to epitomize the totality of the power struggle in the imperial families in Chinese history. In his own words, “I hope I am immersed in the thousands of years of Chinese history. I wish I were an old tea drinker in a tea house on an ancient street, the

²⁵⁰ I will examine these two works in the next chapter.

²⁵¹ Lin Qingxin, *Brushing History against the Grain*. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 3.

²⁵² Ibid. 32.

boundless universe, all living things, and flowing time beneath my eyes.”²⁵³ Here the personal, subjective understanding of Chinese history is intertwined with the collective memory; the real and the fictional both constitute the creation of a timeless history. Similarly, Wang Anyi’s family lineage in *Jishi yu xugou* situates history between reality and fiction, positions the narrator in the flow of time within a solid imperial and contemporary history.

Characteristic 3: multiple and differential temporality

The dialectic between centralization and de-centering effects points to another characteristic intrinsic of the “empire narrative”—the multiple and differential temporality. As will be shown below, more often than not the same history is represented heterogeneously rather than homogeneously. The interweaving of the past, present, and future exhibits a sense of crystalline time, which is neither linear nor cyclical, but the composite of both. For instance, Ling Li’s novels inherit more of the revolutionary legacy, assuming a linear, progressive history and projecting a better future in the historical writings. By contrast, Eryuehe’s “emperor series” manifests neither a sentiment of nostalgia nor a vision of projection onto the future, but rather radiates a double-layered, universal, all-encompassing temporality: the transcendent moral time and the empirical amoral time.

The coexistence of different temporalities signifies the overlapping of differential historical consciousness, the consciousness that desires to resituate contemporary China in history and in the world. An enduring desire in the entire history of modern China, the “placing” of China manifests itself in multiple media, is agreeable to geographically and intellectually diverse audiences. It is a desire that

²⁵³ Su Tong, *Hou gong* (The imperial palace), in *Su Tong wenji* (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1994). Citation on cover.

enfolds the so-called nativist, liberalist, even new-leftist,²⁵⁴ or just the plain ordinary audience, into an all-encompassing staging of the ancient Chinese empire.

In this part, I am not going to downplay commercialization and the pleasure-seeking endeavors of these productions, but focus more on the subject matter and the desire for unity it conveyed. In other words, the aim is to answer the question why historical empires were so intensively represented in such a specific historical context without denying the function of the market. Moreover, without challenging the view that history is always contemporary history, I intend to complicate the temporality a little bit more, to show that contemporary history could be multiple rather than homogeneous due to different perspectives. In other words, from the point of view of social context, both modernization and globalization, as practical processes, imply the coexistence of different times yet at the same time assume the convergence of a single world time. The historical narratives cannot but further complicate the already multiplied temporalities, playing out the anxiety of the vision of the future. Further, without overlooking the revival of traditional values, the homology between family and empire, which by any measure manifests a historical continuity in social ethics, I attempt to formulate the strategic shift, and sometimes the subtle twist, between the language of scarcity and the language of abundance, between identification with the people who were portrayed as the ultimate force for the historical development under the socialist regime and conditional identification with the emperors who were the legitimate heroes of the Chinese Empire. Lastly, following the analysis of divergence and convergence in the multifaceted representations, I direct attention to the rhetoric of “Tianxia,” or “Minxin-Tianxia” (whoever gains the heart of the people will govern all under Heaven), which echoes the totality of the imperial moral principle from the

²⁵⁴ Xudong Zhang, ed. *Whither China: intellectual politics in contemporary China* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001).

remote past. I suggest that the “imperial-time regime” never ceased to exist. Rather, its pervasive power partially explains the way modern China developed and unfolded itself. As such, it renders the textuality of empire a virtual force in redefining a new global order in the contemporary world.

The narrative of empire, perceived as such, thus exhibits itself as a double-enunciation: it not only speaks to the contemporary glocal—global plus local, as some theorists put it—context, but also reflects on its own textual capacity. In other words, the textual complexities spill over the contextual constraint and allow one to see new relations and new possibilities beyond past and present experience. In this respect, empire is not so much a stage of history but rather its *staging*, and its representation could only be characterized with the following ambiguous language: it is more national than nationalistic; more history-conscious than historical; more hero-centered than heroical; more unity-prone than fragmentary; more egalitarian-oriented than hierarchical; more realistically-minded than idealistic; and more transcendently spiritual than immanently practical. In a word, the representation of the past empires is not so much imagining a timeless history to reinforce the national identity as it is evoking multiple tensions and perspectives to reconfigure a relation between past and present, for the sake of the future, in the age of globalization.

The following sections examine the historical films, dramas, and novels about successful emperors and empresses, starting from three films on the first emperor Qin Shihuang to discuss the local-global interactions, followed by historical novels by Eryuehe and Ling Li, and the TV series about the emperors. These sections address the tension between history and present, the importance of genre in shaping literary production and reader’s expectations, and the impact of media on narrative structure and collective reception, in a word, the “empire fever” across the media at the turn of the new century.

CHAPTER 4

Love or Hate: The First Emperor on Screen

---Three movies on the attempted assassination of the first Emperor Qin Shihuang

Empire is materializing before our very eyes.

--- Hardt & Negri *Empire*

The ultimate realm (*jingjie*) of the art of swordsmanship is no sword in hand, and none in mind either. It is to embrace the Whole with the most open mind. It is non-killing. It is peace.

--- Zhang Yimou *Hero*

The First Emperor in the Metropolitan Opera Theater

The world premiere of Tan Dun's opera *The First Emperor* in December 2006 marked a decade of sustained film, television, and stage productions on this historical figure by the most renowned directors and actors in China, as well as its celebrated composer. Tan Dun's opera introduced the notorious first Emperor Qin Shihuang to worldwide opera lovers at the Metropolitan Opera Theater in New York City, just as Chinese films had repeatedly introduced him to global film audiences since 1996.

As a renowned composer trained in both China and the United States, Tan Dun brought to life an epic opera that breaks free from cultural boundaries and blends multiple cultural elements. Not only is it a hybrid product of both the East and the West, or both a tradition and the modern, but it is also impossible to draw the line between the cultural sources. Tan borrowed the coloristic elements from the Shaanxi *Qinqiang* opera and was inspired by the Chinese opera's attention to attack, duration, and decay in the sound. His unusual approach to vocal color and dramatic timing posed a challenge to both the English-speaking singers and to Western ears.²⁵⁵ The result of this tricky compositional and performance balancing act is that the opera

²⁵⁵ Matt Dobkin and Ken Smith, "Tan Dun's Operatic Odyssey," in the Playbill of *The First Emperor*, (New York: Playbill Incorporated, 2006). 22.

became a new product that “expands tradition.”²⁵⁶ “It is not about being Chinese or Western, about being old or new,” Tan Dun explained, “my favorite formula is $1+1=1$.”²⁵⁷

The legendary tenor Plácido Domingo played the title role of the first emperor, and all the performers, except the Yin-Yang master, sang in English. Zhang Yimou served as the director. Together with a highly creative team from different national, cultural backgrounds, Zhang contributed his cinematic spectacle to the Met stage. Portraying the history of the first emperor unifying China and employing the musician Gao Jianli to compose an anthem for the newly founded empire, the story, however, was based on a film script for the 1996 film *The Emperor’s Shadow*, which I will analyze more in detail below. “The work,” as the opera playbill convincingly concluded, “therefore, is built both around the epic (in choruses and spectacle) and the intimate (in vocal solos and subtle orchestrations). As the score represents a synthesis of diverse styles, so the story represents a synthesis of sources. Film, history, and tradition unite to create this musical tale of the powerful emperor who successfully—if controversially—forges a nation.”²⁵⁸

It is hard to tell how many layers we need to approach this operatic odyssey. Music, language, image, the significance of the Met stage, and the first emperor...hybrid yet synthetic, together they construct the “fabula” of this cultural event, to borrow a term from narratology.²⁵⁹ From the Chinese perspective, this opera is an extension of the Chinese fever to present the first emperor to the global audience. In addition to three movies on this controversial figure that were produced in China yet aimed at global recognition, the opera took a further step to elevate the

²⁵⁶ Ibid. 22.

²⁵⁷ Ibid. 18.

²⁵⁸ Ibid. 47.

²⁵⁹ Mieke Bal, *Narratology* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 5

representation from mass culture to high culture, and to transform the Chinese emperor into a world one.

For the purpose of examining the Chinese-based cultural product, the following section is devoted to the three films on the first emperor, in the hope of turning the perspective from global to local, and then back to global again.

Three films on the first emperor

By the turn of the twenty first century, three films on the first Emperor Qin Shihuang had appeared in the global film awards competition: *The Emperor's Shadow* (hereafter *Shadow*) by Zhou Xiaowen in 1996, which was the primary source of Tan Dun's opera, *The Emperor and the Assassin* (hereafter *Assassin*) by Chen Kaige in 1998, and *Hero* by Zhang Yimou in 2002. All three films capture the moment of attempting to assassinate the King of Qin, Ying Zheng, before he founded the Qin Empire in 221BCE. By any measure, such intensive attention to such a historical topic reveals the strategic significance of the founding of the empire in the contemporary period. On the other hand, the difference among three representations nevertheless displays the divergent views toward the same event and as such, invites multiple perspectives on Empire as a concept in the world.

Critics have paid attention to the issues of transnational visibility, nationalism, and even Sinocentrism exhibited in *Hero*, yet they stop short of addressing all three films from a comparative perspective to dig out the complexity manifested in the textual worlds.²⁶⁰ In fact, as will be shown below, the textual commonality manifests the enduring as well as fashionable consciousness about Empire and the unity it

²⁶⁰ Refer to Tzu-hsiu Chiu, "Public Secrets: Geopolitical Aesthetics in Zhang Yimou's *Hero*," See <http://mcel.pacificu.edu/easpac/2005/tzuchiu.php3>. The article addresses the dialectics of "Orientalist Eurocentrism" and "Chinese Nationalist Sinocentrism." Also refer to Robert Y. Eng, "Is *Hero* a Paean to Authoritarianism?" See <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=14371>.

embodies, while the textual difference nonetheless opens up a performative space to play out tensions, ambiguities, and possibilities.

One of the attractions of these films is that they all capture people's imagination about that critical moment. A "what if" question is unavoidably prompted: what if the assassination succeeded? Would history have been changed? How should we perceive the function of individual heroes in relation to the larger historical trend? Who (or what) would assume the moral agency in pushing history forward? Is the unification fully justifiable?

Historically perceived as being in tune with the grand cosmic-imperial order, the unification has been fully justified as the proud moment in Chinese civilization and solid foundation for its national identity, yet the Emperor Qin Shihuang has always been seen as a notoriously controversial figure in Chinese history. How to comprehend his accomplishment of unification and the accompanying tyrannical rule is an enduring task in various representations throughout history. Accordingly, the story of assassination, owing to its dramatically playing out the tension between the violent unification and moral justification, has been a long lasting focus across media. As a result, the choice of hero alternating between assassins and the emperor manifests the characteristic of the respective time period. Regardless of the different view of assassination in imperial China,²⁶¹ in the modern period, the vision has also been changed along time in different socio-political situations. In 1936, the historian Ma Yuancai wrote a biography of the first Qin Emperor, aiming to praise Ying Zheng's accomplishment of unification and alluding to Jiang Jieshi as Ying Zheng's equal in

²⁶¹ For instance, in *Shiji*, Sima Qian portrays Jing Ke and Gao Jianli as heroes who are loyal to friends and sacrifice themselves for the sake of trust, which consequently undermines the image of the Emperor. On the other hand, In *Zi zhi tong jian*, Sima Guang views the assassins as blind villains who, despite the mighty power and historical trend, risk their lives for an unworthy mission. See An Zuozhang and Meng Xiangcai, *Qinshihuangdi da zhuan* (The grand biography of Qin Emperor), (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), 129-130.

modern China.²⁶² Conversely, in 1942, Guo Moruo, who situated himself in the Communist camp, wrote a stage play *Zhu*, in which the heroic Gao Jianli tragically fails to assassinate the first emperor, who is portrayed as an ugly, cruel, lascivious, and superstitious figure universally hated.²⁶³ The initial intention of this play was to criticize Jiang Jieshi, who was the orthodox leader during the period,²⁶⁴ and possibly to mirror himself and other Communists during the Chongqing reign as the tolerant, disguised assassin Gao Jianli. Interestingly enough, the same play was revised by Guo himself in 1956, in which the image of Qin emperor Ying Zheng was noticeably improved.²⁶⁵ However, despite the improvement of his image in the revised version of the play, Qin Shihuang still remains as a negative figure who bears a lot of personal flaws, whereas Gao Jianli is a hero who finally becomes an enlightened representative of the people. Gao in the end realizes the inadequacy of assassinating an individual and advocates a people's war against the tyranny.²⁶⁶ During the Maoist era, especially during the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong praised Qin Shihuang for his achievement of unification, which later led to exaggerated embellishment of Qin Shihuang's image.²⁶⁷

Obviously, every version of the Qin Emperor Ying Zheng bears the imprint of the period, echoing the old saying "all history is but contemporary history." The fact that Qin Shihuang always becomes the focus at every critical moment of history manifests his intrinsic complexity as the source of open-ended value judgment and multi-layered interpretations. In fact, his images perfectly demonstrate the "complex

²⁶² Ma Yuancai, *Qinshihuangdi zhuan* (The Biography of the First Emperor of Qin), 1936.

²⁶³ Guo Moruo, *Zhu* (Shanghai: Qunyi chubanshe, 1946).

²⁶⁴ Guo Moruo, *Gao Jianli*. (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1970), 125.

²⁶⁵ Ibid. Guo says in the epilogue: "When I was writing this play (1942), I intended to allude to Qin Shihuang as Jiang Jieshi, so my treatment was unfair to Qin Shihuang. Qin Shihuang is an important figure who contributed to China's historical development a great deal. How could Jiang Jieshi compare to him!"

²⁶⁶ Ibid. 90.

²⁶⁷ An Zuozhang and Meng Xiangcai, *Qinshihuang da zhuan* (The grand biography of Qin Shihuang) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), 458-459.

strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ and make them the immanent subjects and objects of a range of social and literary narratives,” as Homi Bhabha puts it.²⁶⁸ In other words, the image of Qin Shihuang displays the inherent paradox between “the nation” and “the people” in modern times.²⁶⁹ Whenever unity and national identity become the predominant concern, he is the identifiable hero; whenever people’s interests become the primary concern, he is reduced to the despotic enemy of the people. To be sure, in the socialist discourse, both “the nation” and “the people” have symbolic and rhetorical function. The difference merely resides in the level of unity they signify. While “the nation” designates a more universal, transcendent unity, “the people” implies a more collective, compromising unity among the multitude, which is ideologically consistent with the interests of “the nation.”

Hardt and Negri mentioned in their book *Empire* that the fundamental crisis within a modern nation state lies in the built-in contradiction between the immanent forces of the multitude and the transcendent state power to restore order. The concept of Empire, as a transcendent global form of sovereignty manifested in globalization, might provide a utopian solution for this crisis in modernity.²⁷⁰ Setting aside the definition for nation state or modernity, which bespeaks another problem, the image of Qin Shihuang embodies in modern China the antagonism between the people with immanent desires and the nation as transcendent sovereignty. However, on the other hand, the antagonism thus manifested is not so much exposing a national crisis as reinforcing a lasting imperial vision of China. Indeed, it constitutes a continued myth-

²⁶⁸ Homi Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in *Nation and Narration* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), 292.

²⁶⁹ In the socialist discourse, however, “the people” and “the nation” have a similar unitary and rhetorical function. The nation is the symbolic form for the people. Whoever is against the nation is against the people, but not vice versa. Whoever is against the people isn’t necessarily against the nation. It may be just regarded as the contradiction within the nation.

²⁷⁰ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 76.

making process, one in which unification as a norm of Chinese history has been deemed ultimately moral and ethical. The persistent cry for unity at times of disunity, the forces pushing for unification in history, have structured an empire mentality which contributes to the myth of Chinese civilization. This imperial vision of China, as an essentialized, predominant way of thinking, has fertilized a multi-ethnic country that otherwise would be perceived as contradictory to a modern nation state. As a result, the diversified representation of the Qin Emperor never aims to undermine the power of unification, yet to convey some underlying ambivalent humanistic messages to appeal to public sentiment and call for social consciousness. To this end, no matter whether it is historical recovery or literary representation, the elaborated aspect of the Emperor's image reveals but the interweaving vision of history, of humanism, of the position of hero, and ultimately, the ambiguous relation between the traditional Empire and the modern nation state.

In this light, it does not matter whether the emperor is portrayed as a hero or not, what matters is the vision of history conveyed from the representations. He could be an immoral tyrant and deserve to be overthrown, yet the unification he achieved set the norm for Chinese history, and the notion of "Tianxia" manifests the transcendent moral order for the people. On the other hand, as demonstrated above, specific historical situations do determine the different strategies to manipulate the discursive identification either with the emperor or with the assassin. The image of the emperor thus exhibits the specific historicity or temporality of the time period when it is produced. Besides Guo Moruo's stage plays, one interesting story about the shifting historicity is the evolution of the film *Shadow*. The film was first conceived in the mid 1980s. Director Zhou Xiaowen at that time had in mind the title "Xue Zhu" (Bloody Zhu), referring to the musical instrument used by Gao Jianli to attack the emperor. Resonating with Guo Moruo's stage play *Zhu* in the 1940s, it reminds us of the scene

in which the revolutionary hero Gao Jianli attacks the brutal tyrant. Yet by 1995 when the film was finally shot, the title became “Qin Song” (*The Anthem of Qin*; English title *The Emperor’s Shadow*).²⁷¹ With the enduring influence of music replacing the weapon of assassination—the musical instrument—the film places more stress on the transcendent power of music and the rhetoric “Tianxia” it represents.

The thematic shift in *Shadow* parallels the diachronic transition from “revolutionary narrative” to “empire narrative.” Needless to say, *Assassin* and *Hero* also participate in the contemporary “empire narrative.” Although the images of Ying Zheng are not unambiguously heroic in all three films, they are not negative as in Guo Moruo’s plays. Whether or not portrayed as a hero, the (future) emperor is the protagonist in all three films, which signifies the intensive attention to Empire. On the other hand, synchronically, the three films produced in the same time period on the same event manifest differentiating temporalities in contemporary China. They converge in justifying unification as a promise of ultimate peace in the rhetoric of “Tianxia,” yet they diverge in portraying the image of the emperor.

Moreover, all three films were aimed at global film awards, trying to win international recognition. As Dai Jinhua pointed out, *Shadow* and *Assassin* are in the category of art film, aiming at European film awards, yet *Hero* is characterized as a commercial film, targeting a Hollywood Oscar film prize.²⁷² The different categorization of the films also influenced the filmmakers’ thematic and stylistic choices. Therefore, the imagination of a Chinese temporality is intertwined with the imagination of global expectation, both thematically and stylistically. The convergence and divergence of the three films, hence, exhibit the multifaceted

²⁷¹ See Dai Jinhua “Ci Qin xingdong.” (The action of assassinating the Qin emperor). A Talk at China Central Television Station (CCTV) on April 5, 2005. See <http://www.cctv.com/program/bjzt/topic/education/C13808/20050405/101615.shtml>.

²⁷² Ibid.

manifestations of a dialectic relation between “the imagination of what the international audience want to see” and “what the directors want to show” about Chinese history and culture. Falling within the spectrum between national imagination and global imagination, the three films not only participate in the “empire narrative” prevalent in contemporary China, but also contribute to the global imagination of a newly emergent world order at large.

All three films justify unification as a promise of ultimate peace in the rhetoric of “Tianxia” (all under Heaven), even though they employ different strategies to influence the conditional identification with the emperor. On the other hand, no matter whether the emperor is portrayed as a hero or not, his behavior is understood to follow the historical trend of unification, which, if not accomplished by Ying Zheng, might have been accomplished by somebody else. The normalization of unification, justification of the historical trend, and moralization of the emperor’s behavior all prove the lasting influence of the “Imperial-time regime”—its centripetal and centrifugal forces are played out in the contemporary national-global context.

In *Shadow*, the emperor appears to be a hero, yet he has to suffer personal loss that results from his violence. The audience is led to identify with him sympathetically. In *Assassin*, the emperor is portrayed as a physically unappealing, psychologically unstable, usurping, illegitimate ruler. He suffers not only loss of love but also a psychological split and constant self-questioning. It is hard for people to identify with him except to identify with his ideal blueprint of unification. In *Hero*, no doubt, the cinematic language creates the emperor as a hero of superhuman wisdom. Yet, rather than a flesh-and-blood human being, he is portrayed as no more than an abstract concept, which more or less disrupts the rule of cinematic identification and superimposes the heroic image onto the audience. If the omnipotent, sage-like Ying Zheng in *Shadow* and *Hero* implies the vision of history as predetermined, non-

reversible progression in which a charismatic hero plays a crucial role in pushing the historical trend forward, the psychologically unstable Ying Zheng in *Assassin* nevertheless conveys more of a view of a discursive development of history in which an historical event happens just by chance. If *Shadow* and *Assassin* celebrate both the unified empire and humanistic message of benevolence, *Hero*, on the other hand, takes unification as automatically justifiable and articulates the abstract concept of *Tianxia* that promises the ultimate peace.

To be sure, all three films convey the term “Tianxia” as the displacement of “empire.” Literally meaning “all under Heaven,” “Tianxia” contains two layers of implications signifying unification: one is the integration of geographical spaces, the other is the unity of human subjects; one is objective, the other is subjective; one is material, the other is spiritual, one is political, the other is moral. These two layers, interrelated yet sometimes contradictory, construct the double-structure of empire and compose the basic contradiction in the films: military conquest and moral justification. To resolve the contradiction is to eliminate the middle realm within the three-level hierarchy: individual-state-empire, to transform individuals into qualified subjects of the empire, to persuade them to accept the present killing for the sake of future non-killing, to convey the Grand Unification (*Da yi tong*) message of “Tianxia” which could transcend the boundaries of states.

For instance, in *Shadow*, Ying Zheng constantly emphasizes the comparable importance of conquering other states with military force and conquering human minds with music: “The mission of conquering ‘Tianxia’ will end with the fall of Qi, the mission of conquering human minds will start with Gao Jianli [the musician].” “Music can make me sing and cry. It accordingly can make the people of ‘Tianxia’ sing and cry along with my will. We should not only inscribe the character *qiu* (prisoner) onto their foreheads, but also inscribe it onto their minds.” Regardless of the

condescendingly confident tone, these statements nonetheless express the urgent need to transform the loser state's subjects into the empire's subjects, to fuse the two layers of "Tianxia" into one unity.

Similarly, in *Assassin*, Ying Zheng says to the crying Han cartographers: "You are crying for your own state. You are good subjects of Han....Han will cease to exist, but a great empire (Chinese 'Guojia') will emerge. Qin and the other six states, as far as eyes can see, will be unified. All the people of 'Tianxia' will be the subjects of this empire."²⁷³ There will be only one ruler, a good Emperor, who will rescue all the people under Heaven when the six states disappear..." This statement, again uttered by Ying Zheng himself, explicitly suggests the moral justification of the future emperor.

In *Hero*, however, unlike the other films, the justification is nonetheless articulated by the sword master Broken Sword from Nameless's narrative: "An individual's suffering, when compared to 'Tianxia' people's suffering, is not suffering anymore. The hatred between the states of Zhao and Qin, when placed into 'Tianxia,' is not hatred anymore."

"Tianxia," as an all-encompassing symbolic figure, transcends time and space, and signifies an overpowering morality to legitimize violence. To articulate this ultimate moral order associated with "Tianxia," the three films each surprisingly employ a similar narrative strategy. They all invent fictive figures involving romantic relationships to intensify, and meanwhile compromise, the confrontations within "Tianxia."

²⁷³ It is worth noting that in this scene the Chinese word translated as "empire" in the English subtitles is "guojia," used for "nation" or "state" in modern usage. Perhaps, in Chinese understanding, "Empire," as a loan word from the West, is connected to imperialism, which is different from the way they think about the traditional Chinese empire.

Romance sublimated —love or hate

Inasmuch as romance dramatically intensifies love-hate relationships, pushing the contradictions into climax, it plays a significant role in all three films. Being involved in the inter-personal, inter-state struggles, and finally being sublimated in such a way that sacrifice is necessary in one way or another, romance sensationalizes, or controversially, mythologizes the bloody political event and helps to articulate the rhetoric of “Tianxia.”

1. The Shadow of the Emperor: winner's tears

In order to bring to the surface the tension between the double conquests of states and human minds, *Shadow* presents a triangular relationship complicating the dynamics between conquering and being conquered. However, this triangular relationship is not in the usual romantic sense per se, but registered in a more metaphorical, symbolic realm. In the end, as will be demonstrated, the triangular relationship turns out to dramatize Ying Zheng himself.

To carry out his plan of conquering people's minds after unification, the King of Qin Ying Zheng has first to conquer his childhood friend, the famous musician Gao Jianli. He tries to persuade Gao to compose the anthem for the empire, which he believes will erase the traces of killing, eradicate hatred, and bring peace into people's minds. After his effort fails, the beautiful but crippled Princess Yueyang fulfills this mission by nurturing Gao back from a suicidal fasting attempt. “You go to conquer ‘Tianxia,’ I am going to conquer this madman,” says Yueyang to her father. Once Yueyang has made love with Gao she is cured of her disability, which also partly originated from Gao's suicidal attempt. Yueyang falls in love with Gao, implying that they are both conquering and being conquered simultaneously.

The twist involved in the romance, in a sense, manifests the ambivalent yet interdependent relationship between the conquest of states and the conquest of human minds. Indeed, as a physically weak, mentally pedantic, and virtually symbolic assassin, Gao represents non-killing, benevolence, and love. His conquest of Yueyang, or more precisely, rehabilitation of Yueyang, is a metaphor for the power of benevolence, of love. Even his powerful counterpart, Ying Zheng, has to admit: “if you can make Yueyang cry, then you can make me cry, then you can make all the ‘Tianxia’ people cry.” To this end, to keep Gao alive is to keep the power of moral justification, is to keep the potential of conquering people’s minds. Therefore, the romance not only involves Gao Jianli and Yueyang, but also involves Ying Zheng, who in effect plays a devastatingly crucial role in this relationship.

In fact, everybody in the balanced triangle has double identities, implying the intersubjective relationship among them. Yueyang nurtures Gao back to life, serving the role of mother; on the other hand, Gao gives her a second life by curing her disabled legs, symbolically serving the role of father. Similarly, as the father of Yueyang, Ying Zheng in childhood shares the same mother with Gao, and the image of this mother in turn prompts Gao to molest Yueyang. In this regard, both men have a mutually reversible relationship—father/daughter and mother/son relations—with Yueyang. This seemingly entangled and preposterous relationship, contradictory as it were, nonetheless brings to the fore the internal split/contradiction of Ying Zheng himself.

To push it further, it is rather safe to state that Yueyang actually embodies the Empire itself. As the product of the future emperor, powerful and beautiful as such, she is nevertheless disabled. Only with Gao’s love can she recover as a more complete figure. Without love, she would either remain incomplete, as suggested at the beginning of the film, or die away and remain fragmentary, as implied in the end when

Li Si reports to the new emperor that Wang Ben has dismembered her body in their wedding room. Such is the metaphor of the newly founded empire that falls apart without benevolence and love.

The metaphor that Yueyang embodies the vulnerable empire is best portrayed in the scenes of parallel action when Gao and Yueyang first make love. With a joyful scream, the Qin army breaks the gate of Chu with a log—a phallic symbol—while at the same time Yueyang’s body melts in Gao’s arms. The alternate and overlapping images of the victory banners and Yueyang’s body manifest the parallel processes of two conquests: conquest with military aggression and conquest with love (Figures 4-1 and 4-2). Unlike the commonly used parallel action in cinematic practice that stresses condensation of time and continuum of consecutive film segments,²⁷⁴ this parallel action is purely metaphorical. Yueyang’s female body, insofar as it nurtures as well as suffers, signifies the empire awaiting rescue. Meanwhile, insofar as Gao heals Yueyang’s enduring physical drawback, the obtainment of Yueyang’s love in effect metaphorically parallels the conquest of the empire, not by military invasion, but by love. In the succeeding shot Gao waves in front of people the silk stained with Yueyang’s virgin blood, a gesture deliberately juxtaposed with a shot of the Qin army banners, suggesting the triumphant occupation of both territories.

²⁷⁴ Stefan Sharff. *The Elements of Cinema: Toward a Theory of Cinesthetic Impact* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 87.



Figure 4-1: Yueyang and Gao Jianli make love for the first time



Figure 4-2: the Qin Army conquers Chu

In another situation this metaphor resides in Ying Zheng's comment on Gao's song, which articulates the defect of the empire: "How fascinating! ... This interprets the importance of the human mind and the importance of musicians. Wherever there is a mountain, there is a notch. There is no reason to deny it." This comment, brought up

to oppose Li Si's legalist view and his smear of Gao Jianli, follows the scene in which the newly recovered Yueyang is walking falteringly along the bank and stumbling in both Ying Zheng and Gao's sight. Against the imposing music, the awe-inspiring current of the river separates the emperor and the singing prisoners led by Gao. The music mixed with the sound of the river, and the fusion of water mist with the image of prisoners, together imply the power of the people. The scene echoes the Tang Emperor Taizong's famous motto: "water can float the ship, yet it can also capsize the ship." Indeed, in the prior long shot, the small, isolated figure of the emperor facing the magnificent river exposes this worrying concern (Figure 4-3). Only with the appearance of the staggering Yueyang, the symbol of the vulnerable Empire, is the tension between the two contrasting parties softened. The caring eyes of Gao looking toward Yueyang suggest that only Gao and the benevolence he embodies can make up the defect of the Empire, and stabilize the emperor's rule.



Figure 4-3: Ying Zheng faces the river and the singing prisoners

It is noteworthy that in this sequence, the camera adopts an omniscient view, belittling both Ying Zheng and Gao Jianli. The shot is framed over Ying Zheng's shoulder towards the splendid river from a high angle, contrasting his small image with the breathtaking current of the river. Yet Ying Zheng always occupies a more privileged subjective position than Gao Jianli. It is first from his gaze, followed by Gao's, that Yueyang's vulnerability is exposed. The multi-angularity of the camera, the visual manipulation—modulating emphasis and emotional tone through variations in camera positioning vis-à-vis the scene's action—ambivalently leads to the intended identification with the emperor yet meanwhile undermines this identification.

Moreover, if we leave aside the romance for a moment and pick Yueyang out of the triangle, the relationship between Ying Zheng and Gao Jianli turns out to be unbalanced. The encounter between the strong and the weak, between military power and humanistic sentiment, between conquering states by force and conquering people's hearts by love, more explicitly manifests its over-determined favor toward the former. In response to Gao's criticism, contrasting Ying Zheng's cruel slaughter with the Way of Heaven ("Tiandao") which is non-killing, Ying Zheng finally replies to him before the ritual to Heaven: the Way of Heaven is nothing but the face of the winner. To be sure, given the cinematic portrayal of Ying Zheng, as powerful, intelligent, and omniscient, he is the pre-determined winner from the very beginning; Gao Jianli is just a foil, a shadow, another part of Ying Zheng himself.

Indeed, Gao, as the complementary figure, nothing more than a tool, is intended to be employed to help carry out Ying Zheng's ideal cause of unification, to make up the defect of the empire accomplished by military unification. In this sense, the twist of the double conquests revealed in the Gao-Yueyang romance is nothing but the disclosure of Ying Zheng's internal contradiction, his dynamic perception of the unified empire. In other words, even though the ultimate winner is registered with

power in his mind, he sometimes is dominated by the counter force of love. As Ying Zheng utters to Gao Jianli explicitly: "...for how many times I was trying to conquer death, yet I was always blocked by a shadow. It is the Way of Heaven that brings you to me. You have become part of me. You must endure all of this and prepare for the severe punishment with me." In this light, the contradiction between Ying Zheng and Gao Jianli gives way to the internal split of Ying Zheng himself. Along the same logic is the children's song presenting two dogs fighting. The song is later used to compose the melody for the Anthem of the Empire, but also resonates with Ying Zheng's enduring psychological split, his attempt of self-othering, self-mirroring, and self-correcting. Indeed, this fighting against oneself, insofar as it is lasting and continuous, more often than not manifests its power violently. In the sequence depicting Jing Ke's assassination attempt, after all the attempts fail, Jing Ke lies to Ying Zheng that Gao Jianli, in order to remonstrate with the king, has put his severed finger into the map. However, this finger later proves actually to be a knife to be used to kill Ying Zheng. This easily overlooked detail reveals such a message: the contradictory part of oneself may sometimes become the sharp weapon against oneself. Ying Zheng is certainly the bearer of this contradiction.

This continuous internal contradiction finally reaches a resolution when both Yueyang and Gao Jianli die before the emperor performs the ritual to the Heaven. Love is suppressed, and military victory displays its power to all under Heaven. As suggested above, the dismembered body of Yueyang foretells the fragmenting of empire due to the failure of love. In this respect, does introducing the image of Huhai, the even crueler future Emperor in the short-lived Qin Dynasty, herald the fall of the empire owing to its greater failure of benevolence?

The imbalanced power encounter between military victory and moral justification is dramatically performed in the final sequence.²⁷⁵ Against the background of strong music that sets the tone, Ying Zheng is delivering his victor's speech; the poisoned, blind Gao Jianli suddenly throws his musical instrument, the *zhu*, at Ying Zheng. Unfortunately, unlike the historical record of Gao's assassination attempt, the attack is too weak to engender any real effect. It is at most a symbolic assassination, a warning gesture. After Gao dies, he is taken away downward from the steps while Ying Zheng is walking upward to the huge cauldron to light the fire. The sharp contrast between the upward and downward directions, between the upright, strong figure and the prone, frail body, between the confident, lonely emperor and the dead, weak shadow, intensifies the victory of the military unification visually. This sequence, with the rhetorical juxtaposition of camera angles, with the imposing music the Anthem of Qin, and finally with the panning camera following Ying Zheng's steps, worshiped by the Terra-Cotta army-like troops, is maintained for almost two minutes. In all respects, this scene celebrates unification and power, whereas the voice of love remains weak. As Ying Zheng says to the dying Gao: "You are wrong. History is going to be written by me [the victor]," implying the assassination attempt would not exist in history, so that even the shadow himself may be erased forever.

However, despite the overpowering statement, the identification process remains ambiguous. Insofar as the Anthem was composed by Gao and sung by the prisoners, this scene also suggests the undying legacy Gao left behind and its subversive force to the empire. In the end, after lighting the fire in the huge cauldron, facing Heaven alone when he kneels down, the emperor uncontrollably weeps (Figure 4-4). This scene echoes yet contradicts Yueyang's statement that her father is unable to cry in any circumstance, suggesting the virtual force of love that is still working and

²⁷⁵ This reading is also in agreement with that in Dai Jinhua, "Ci Qin xingdong."

fighting inside him. Isn't benevolence the eternal task to accomplish? The huge cauldron, the symbol of unified empire from the ancient myth,²⁷⁶ calmly witnesses his tears, rendering the problem unresolved till the end of the film.



Figure4-4: the new emperor weeps in front of the cauldron.

2. *The Emperor and the Assassin: loss of love*

It is notable that the film *Assassin* also presents a triangle relationship, and the only difference is that it is a genuinely triangular romance. Moreover, this triangular relationship also presents the theme of the woman being transformed from the emperor's collaborator to his enemy, even though at a different level. While Princess Yueyang in *Shadow* is more of a rebellious victim without any choice, Lady Zhao in *Assassin* is very much a strong-willed, free woman. While Yueyang's love is devoted only to one man, Lady Zhao's love is extended to all the "Tianxia" people. In a sense,

²⁷⁶ In Chinese myth, Yu the Great divided a unified empire with nine caldrons.

Lady Zhao embodies the idea of unification with love, and she is consistent in this throughout the film.²⁷⁷

At the beginning, Lady Zhao is convinced that Ying Zheng's project to unify the warring states will stop killing and rescue all the people under Heaven. Deeply moved, she is determined to help him out. Holding the dagger Ying Zheng gives her, initially a symbol of love which later turns out to be the weapon to attack him, she goes off with Prince Dan of Yan like an agent with a secret mission. At this point, Lady Zhao is promoted as a godlike figure, transcending both the narrowly defined human love and the boundary of individual states. She embodies the ideal fusion of unification with power and with love. "You are different from them (other kings), you said you will rescue all the people of 'Tianxia.' ... Finally, I have found things to do for you," says she to Ying Zheng before setting out.

In opposition to Lady Zhao's calmness, confidence, and self-determination, Ying Zheng's mental state appears to be unstable, displayed through his gestures, his speech, his facial expressions, and his exaggerated, paranoiac performance. The repeated reminder from a courtier—"King of Qin, have you forgotten the great mission of unifying 'Tianxia?'"—uttered in an off-pitched voice, signifies the vulnerability of his psyche. He is constantly torn apart by internal weakness and an externally imposed mission. The internalization of the exteriority contradicts his initial human nature, which continually tortures him and finally leads to his alienation. It is as if the idea of unification is not from his own ambition, but from his ancestors, including his newly-discovered real father, Lü Buwei. As he says to Prince Dan, "even if you kill me, this cause [unification] will still be carried out by somebody else; if not me, maybe you." This articulation of both discursive turn and predetermined teleology of history distances him from a superior hero. It reduces him to an ordinary person

²⁷⁷ A feminist reading of this film may assert that the treatment manifests gender consciousness.

who is lucky enough to be placed onto the throne. The tremendous pressure imposed upon him from both inside and outside the court has gradually alienated him from his good nature. The most telling examples are his cold-blooded executions of his real father Lü Buwei and the illicit children that his mother has had with Lao Ai. With these inhumane killings within the court, he is shown gradually transformed into a cruel, lonely tyrant. The will of benevolent rule, the love for the people of “Tianxia,” in the end gives way to the desire for power and self-protection.

In this sense, the initially heroic figure in Lady Zhao’s eyes, Ying Zheng, is not much different from other narrow-minded kings. The chauvinistic King of Zhao, at the moment he loses his kingdom to Ying Zheng’s army, calls on innocent children to sacrifice their lives rather than survive the fall of Zhao. No better than he, Ying Zheng, the incoming conqueror, out of fear of revenge, commands his soldiers to bury the children alive. These two painfully violent actions, though carried out for different reasons, converge in the same result—killing, which finally destroys Lady Zhao’s love and faith toward Ying Zheng.

Along with the deepening discovery of a dynamic psyche, the gradual transformation of Ying Zheng engenders a transferring, intersubjective effect among the characters. In fact, Jing Ke’s transformation proves to be Ying Zheng’s reversal. Jing Ke, initially a reclusive swordsman who regrets his previous misdeeds and refuses to kill any more, later becomes a chess piece controlled by both Prince Dan and Lady Zhao for their plan to assassinate Ying Zheng. From a tool in a secret plot by Ying Zheng and Lady Zhao to create an excuse to invade the State of Yan, Jing Ke finally turns out to be a real dagger pointing at Ying Zheng.²⁷⁸ Jing Ke’s change of

²⁷⁸ There are two versions of this film, in which Jing Ke is presented differently. In the longer version, presumably popular in the West, Jing Ke is portrayed as more of a strong-willed hero, and Lady Zhao’s love for him is a just and natural response to his charming character and humanistic concern. Yet in the shorter version, presumably popular within China, Jing Ke’s image turns out to be a flatterer, seemingly

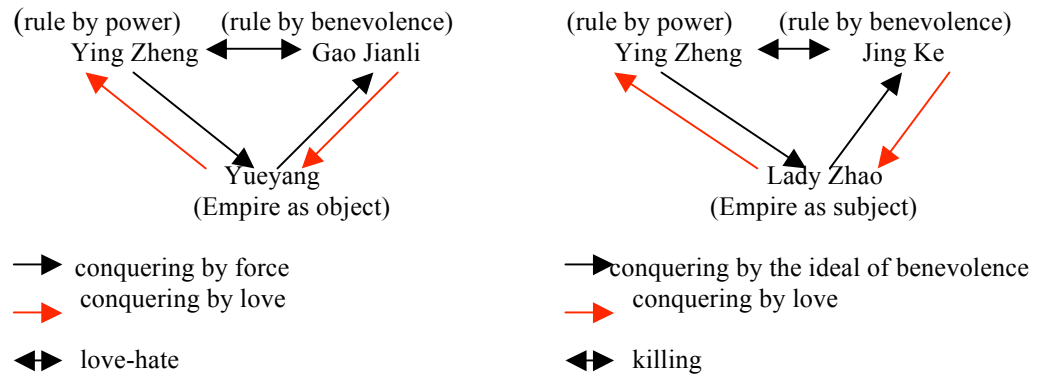
attitude, from empathetic to cooperative with Lady Zhao to repay her rescue, and ultimately to being willing to kill Ying Zheng for the sake of all the children under Heaven, in effect parallels Lady Zhao's change of attitude toward Ying Zheng. The relations could be described like this:

- Lady Zhao, empathetic toward Ying Zheng, leaves Ying Zheng alone, cooperates with him on behalf of his benevolent, ideal unification, then desires to kill him for the sake of saving all children under Heaven.
- Jing Ke, empathetic toward Prince Dan and Lady Zhao, cooperates with them out of gratitude to Lady Zhao, then desires to kill Ying Zheng for the sake of saving all children under Heaven.

In this light, Lady Zhao's turning to Jing Ke manifests her punishment of Ying Zheng for his betrayal of benevolence. The dagger hidden in the map, originally a gift to Lady Zhao from Ying Zheng, now becomes the weapon held by Jing Ke to attack him. From this perspective, the appearance of Jing Ke is no more than a shadow of Lady Zhao to reveal her hatred toward Ying Zheng, articulating her broadest love for the people of "Tianxia."

In this regard, a similar structure can be perceived in both *Shadow* and *Assassin*. The triangular relationship in both films functions to play out the tension between rule by power and rule by benevolence. The woman figure, Princess Yueyang in *Shadow* and Lady Zhao in *Assassin*, embodying the ideal empire fused power with love, dramatizes the original contrasting relationship between the emperor and the assassin:

being controlled by Lady Zhao. This analysis is mainly based on the shorter version in which Lady Zhao occupies a more important position than Jing Ke.



It deserves attention that Lady Zhao plays a more active and loftier role than Yueyang. While Yueyang functions to manifest the internal split within Ying Zheng himself, Lady Zhao's existence uncovers the gradual alienation of Ying Zheng. The two assassins, Gao Jianli in *Shadow* and Jing Ke in *Assassin*, intended by Ying Zheng to conquer human minds in the former, and to justify military invasion in the latter, display the different emphases of the two films. While in *Shadow*, Ying Zheng is partially aware of the importance of benevolence from beginning to end, in *Assassin*, he betrays this ideal further and further, which results in his loss of love from his acquaintance and Lady Zhao.

The loss of love finds its visual evidence in the ending sequence. After Jing Ke's assassination attempt has failed, driving away all his subordinates due to their helplessness, the desperate Ying Zheng meets Lady Zhao again in the empty Unification Hall. This is the visual repetition of a prior scene in which Ying Zheng sends Lady Zhao off to carry out her secret mission. However, it is a repetition with significant difference. Rather than coming back to celebrate her fulfilled mission and prove her love toward him, she comes back to take Jing Ke's body with her. Separated by the water of a pool, Ying Zheng and Lady Zhao are presented in a series of shot-reverse shots moving progressively closer, from extreme long shots, to medium shots, and finally facial close-ups of them (Figures 4-5—4-8). These shots manifest the

physical as well as emotional distance, rather than intimacy, of these two former lovers. Moreover, in this sequence of separation, Lady Zhao's image carries a longer "apparent time" than Ying Zheng's image. "Apparent time," a cinematic term related to the lingering "after image" which holds over from one image to the next in separation, is defined as the time created by the "aura" of the extra "after image" of each picture in separation. It refers to the strength and intensity of an image. "The more significant an image is (in form), the stronger the apparent time."²⁷⁹ Insofar as Lady Zhao's calmness belittles Ying Zheng's fluster, her image generates a stronger impact on Ying Zheng, thus a longer "apparent time." It visually demonstrates Ying Zheng's diminished stature as a character. After seeing Lady Zhao off, standing alone on the bridge in the Hall, Ying Zheng hollowly whispers to himself: Ying Zheng, King of Qin, have you forgotten the commandment of unifying "Tianxia"? (Figures 4-9 and 4-10) With an ambiguously bitter smile on his face shown in the close-up, this murmur suggests his unchangeable dominant goal of unification without mercy. This psychological pain, caused by the loss of love from his mother, father, siblings, and lover, complicates and dramatizes the issues of power struggle within the court and the greater mission of unifying "Tianxia."

It is ironic that in this scene, the celebration of power and the manifestation of alienation contradict each other, yet reinforce each other. The squared artificial pool, symbolically the "four seas" (si hai) of the world, together with the grand hall, implies the power of unification. On the other hand, the vacant, lonely figure standing on the

²⁷⁹ "Apparent time" is a term drawn from the nautical vocabulary. In nautical terminology, "apparent wind" refers to the wind created by forward movement of a boat. Through proper sail arrangement, this "extra" wind is used, in addition to the "real" wind from the atmosphere, to propel the craft forward. In separation, time is compounded in the sequence of images by the aura of that extra after-image. While watching image A, the viewer is strongly and predictably aware of the presence of image B in recurrent cycles. In short, image A receives a "shadow" of apparent time from the previous shot and, in turn, projects an apparent time on the next image B, and so on. See Stefan Sharff, *The Elements of Cinema: Toward a Theory of Cinesthetic Impact*, 63.

bridge in the emptiness of the huge hall suggests the internal emptiness. This sequence is composed of virtually still images. It visualizes the stratification of different discourses, intensifying the dramatic contradictions in layers from outside to inside. Resonating with both the lovely memory in his childhood when Lady Zhao held his hand crossing the bridge, and with the episode in which he forced Lao Ai to walk on a high single-log bridge, this scene reveals the double-edged nature of power. In other words, acquiring power needs legitimation, and abusing power loses that legitimation. Without a legitimate bloodline, Ying Zheng now resembles Lao Ai walking across a risky bridge;²⁸⁰ without love from Lady Zhao, Ying Zheng now loses the support from the people of “Tianxia,” which will prove the vulnerability of his rule. This symbolic image of a bridge, comparable to the image of the water current in *Shadow*, echoes the Chinese proverb “the higher the climb, the heavier the fall” (pa de yue gao, die de yue zhong) and “having more help once you have the Way, having little help once you don’t have the Way” (de dao duo zhu, shi dao gua zhu). It foreshadows the predestined failure of Qin rule.

²⁸⁰ This scene only exists in the longer version of the film.



Figure 4-5: Ying Zheng meets Lady Zhao



Figure 4-6: Lady Zhao comes back to see Ying Zheng



Figure 4-7: Ying Zheng talks to Lady Zhao



Figure 4-8: Lady Zhao: "I've come back to take Jing Ke's body back to Yan."



Figure 4-9: Lady Zhao is leaving

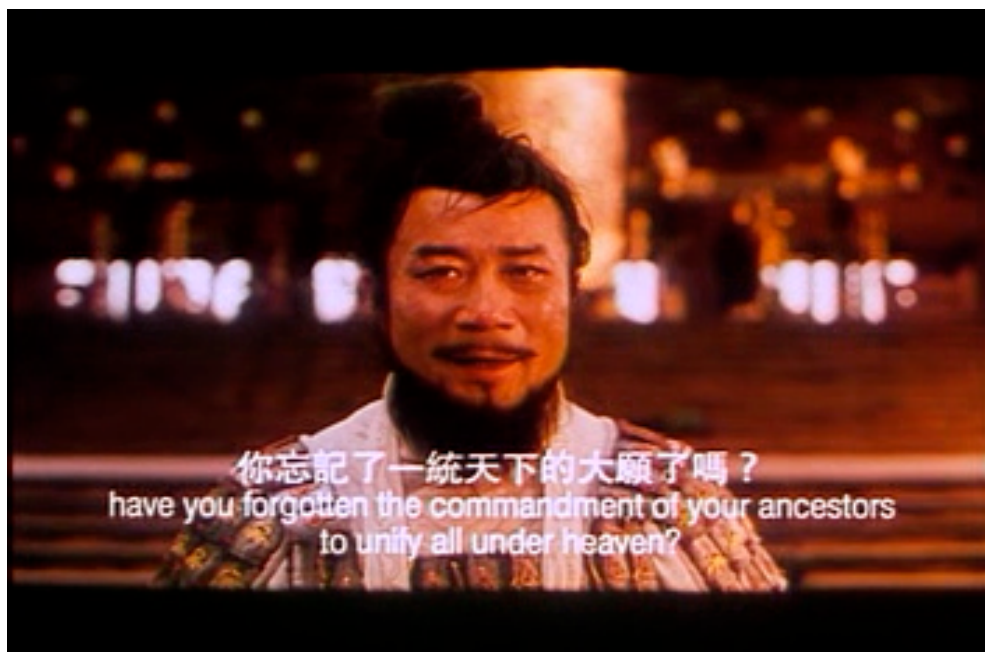


Figure 4-10: The lonely (future) emperor murmurs to himself

It is noteworthy that in both *Shadow* and *Assassin*, the female characters both willingly have themselves branded with a Chinese character *qiu* (prisoner) on their faces. A symbol of military triumph of the Qin state, this character initially signifies eternal inferiority and humiliation for people who have it. However, in the films, the character bears double implications for Yueyang and Lady Zhao. On the one hand, it symbolizes the prisoner of love. For Yueyang, the consistent love for Gao Jianli; for Lady Zhao, the love for Ying Zheng and the people of “Tianxia.” On the other hand, it manifests the rebellious potential for betrayal. For Yueyang, it gestures toward the rebellious attempt against the oppressive father who betrays his own and her will; for Lady Zhao, it finally turns out to be the evidence of disillusionment and hatred. Nevertheless, these irreconcilable double meanings still imply the imbalanced encounter: after all, they are “prisoners.”

Indeed, the disproportionate confrontation between emperor and assassin in *Assassin*, similar to *Shadow*, still conveys the absolute advantage of power. *Shadow* reveals a built-in split within the self, justifying unification as a pre-determined historical trend which requires necessary sacrifice. *Assassin* puts more emphasis on the discursive aspect of history, conveying both the power of unification by force and its vulnerability. Put another way, although both films celebrate unification, and meanwhile manifest the transcendent message of “Tianxia,” *Assassin* is more humanistic in the sense that it explores the complexity of Ying Zheng’s psyche and reduces him to an ordinary man being placed into a significant position, rather than making him a sage-like hero. Director Chen Kaige once said that he intended to portray Ying Zheng as an ordinary person with a complicated personality. He wanted to show how an individual’s fate is determined by uncontrollable historical situations which result in dramatic change in one’s life.²⁸¹ Against the backdrop of the Empire,

²⁸¹ An interview with Chen Kaige by Li Erwei. See *Beijing qingnianbao* (Beijing youth), Oct 23, 1998.

he put more emphasis on an individual's, rather than an emperor's, story, which significantly differentiates his film from other portrayals of Ying Zheng as a born hero.

3. Hero: an abstract concept of "Tianxia" dancing with romance and tradition

If we assert that *Shadow* and *Assassin* both devote great effort to digging out the psychological complexity of the emperor Ying Zheng as a human being to articulate the discourse of "Tianxia," in one way or another, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* rather depicts Ying Zheng as a depthless figure dressed in stylized armor, placed in a huge palace and animated through illustrative dialogues. Moreover, the assassin he encounters is named Nameless, symbolically non-existent, which more explicitly manifests the fictiveness of the whole confrontation. Therefore, the question for Nameless whether or not to assassinate Ying Zheng, and the question for Ying Zheng whether or not to kill Nameless are non-existent questions. Their presence is just to articulate the even more abstract concept "Tianxia." For "Tianxia," Nameless finally gives up assassination; for "Tianxia," Ying Zheng has to kill Nameless to maintain the efficacy of law.

Toward the end of the film when Ying Zheng finally reluctantly orders the killing of Nameless, thousands of arrows fly at Nameless, suggesting he is killed by the arrow storm. However, the supposed dead body exhibits itself as an empty space surrounded by a mass of arrows sticking on the gate. From the following birds-eye view, the machine-like Qin army is shown performing a funeral parade, implying Nameless's body is on the board. Yet, still, the red cover renders the body invisible. (Figures 4-11 and 4-12)²⁸² Against the army's shout "Hail! Hail!" and the melancholy thematic music, the camera cuts to the image of the dead Broken Sword and Flying Snow in the desert, followed by the shot of the empty space on the gate again, finally

²⁸² This observation is also emphasized by Dai Jinhua.

back to Ying Zheng standing alone in the Hall. (Figures 4-13 and 4-14) These juxtaposed images, ambiguous and lyrical, reassure the virtual existence of Nameless. Meanwhile, it is indicated that the actual encounter and final reconciliation is between the two lovers and Ying Zheng. Like the vaguely depicted, homogeneously clothed statesmen in court who push Ying Zheng to kill Nameless, Nameless, rather than a flesh-and-blood human being, merely functions to bring together two contrasting groups of people, assassin and emperor, living in disorder and order, to play out the tensions between individual and state, between state and the unified empire.



Figure 4-11: The arrow storm that shoots Nameless [The empty position of Nameless in the storm of arrows]

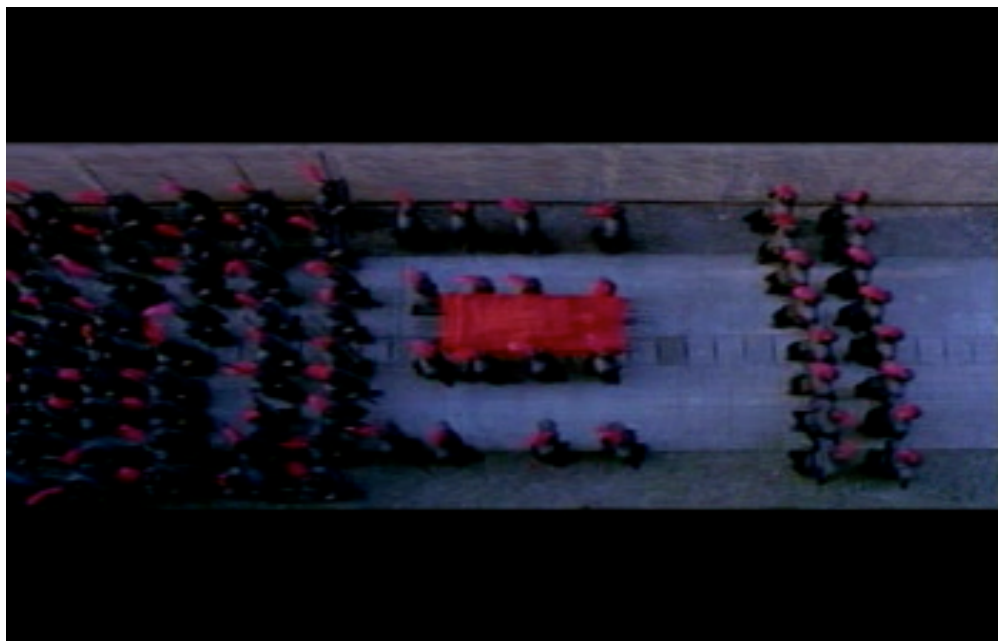


Figure 4-12: The funeral parade for Nameless



Figure 4-13: Flying Snow and Broken Sword die together



Figure 4-14: The lonely emperor stands in the court

These tensions, uttered in the conversation between the emperor and the assassin, also manifest themselves through the relationship of two lovers in different scenarios. Thus, the romance between Broken Sword and Flying Snow revealed in different narratives conveys different phases of love, parallels the inquiry into the value of life, and ultimately articulates the necessary sacrifice for the sake of “Tianxia.”

Indeed, the articulation of “Tianxia” in *Hero*, unlike those in the other two films, bypasses the tension between rule by power and rule by benevolence. It supports more explicitly unification as the dominant goal with ultimate moral justification, which is gradually developed through three romantic scenarios.

In the first scenario narrated by Nameless, Broken Sword and Flying Snow are depicted as two ordinary, jealous lovers. Out of jealousy for each other, they fight, seek revenge, and hurt each other, which later results in the easy defeat by Nameless. Their lives, due to their superior swordsmanship, are measured as no more than the reward offered by the King of Qin, Ying Zheng. According to this narrative, the two

lovers both place their individual emotion ahead of the mission of assassination, or the mission of their state, which leads to their worthless deaths only to benefit Nameless's material pursuit of reward. Displaying its disorder by disarrayed passion, beautiful swordplay, and soaring cinematic choreography in the tone of red color, this narrative divorces the two lovers from their state identity and their initial mission. It is seen through by Ying Zheng for its cheapness, as he refuses to believe that the heroic assassins would be so ignoble.

The second scenario, narrated by Ying Zheng, however, glosses the two lovers with their consistent belief in their assassination mission. They love each other so much as to sacrifice one to protect the other; they love their state so much as to sacrifice themselves in exchange for Ying Zheng's life to save their state. In this light, the value of one life, Flying Snow in this case, plus Sky's life, is worth the value of Ying Zheng, of other individual states. Framed in the tone of blue color, conventionally signifying the rational, the idealistic, and the lofty, this narrative suggests the phase of love which is to endure the life-and-death parting for the higher mission of assassination.

In the third scenario, a correction by Nameless, both the phase of love and the value of life witness a dramatic turn. While Flying Snow sticks to her identity as a subject of Zhao and insists on carrying out the assassination mission, Broken Sword identifies himself with the people of "Tianxia" through a farsighted vision. Therefore, the contradiction between two lovers parallels the contradiction between individual states and the unified empire. According to Broken Sword, to achieve ultimate peace, one has to transcend his/her own state identity to become a subject of the unified empire, and to some extent, to sacrifice one's life is necessary. "One individual's suffering, compared to the sufferings of the people of "Tianxia," is no longer suffering; the hatred between states of Zhao and Qin, placed under "Tianxia," is no longer

hatred,” says Broken Sword to Nameless. Moved by this statement, Nameless finally gives up the assassination attempt, bringing about the deaths of the three would-be assassins in the end. These lives, sacrificed for the foreseeable peace of “Tianxia,” gain their highest value as history. On the other hand, in terms of love, Broken Sword offers his life to Flying Snow, in this way compromises his love for her and for “Tianxia,” and equates his romantic love with the concern for the future empire. Similarly, Flying Snow kills herself to be together with Broken Sword, which echoes Moon’s words: “Broken Sword and Flying Snow, their lives never part, their swords never part either.” This tragic climax manifests the highest realm of love in traditional Chinese romance—loyalty to each other forever, be it in life or death. Displayed in the tone of white color, which conventionally signifies purity and death, the violent sacrifice of the two lovers most powerfully justifies unification and the discourse of “Tianxia,” yet in a superimposed, intangible manner.

In fact, the statement about three realms (“jingjie”) of swordsmanship, regardless of its providing an unrealistically fetishizing showcase of Chinese martial arts, nonetheless frames the three romance scenarios. In the first realm body and sword are fused into one so that sword is body and body is sword, and even grass held in one’s hand can become a sharp weapon. This realm corresponds to the first scenario in which jealousy (body is sword) plus sword leads to worthless conflict and easy defeat. The second realm celebrates the vital energy (“qi”) described as sword in one’s mind. One can make the enemy withdraw one hundred steps with the sword in mind instead of the sword in hand. This realm corresponds to the second scenario in which steadfast belief in revenge (sword in mind), manifested in violent sacrifice of lives, makes it possible for Nameless to draw closer to Ying Zheng in order to carry out the assassination. The third realm is without sword in either hand or mind. It embraces the Whole with the most open mind, to achieve the realm of non-killing, of peace. By the

same token, it is associated with the third scenario in which all people willingly give up assassination and justify the sacrifice. This seemingly mystical depiction of swordsmanship most effectively justifies violent unification, with the embellished hope for the ultimate realm, the non-killing, the peace.

To be sure, the film makes every effort to celebrate the power and order of the Qin state. The geometric-shaped, machine-like military force, the highly exaggerated arrow hail, and the awe-inspiring imperial court, by all means signify the might of the winner and the violence it generates. However, unlike the exaggerated and compelling violent portrayals in *Shadow* and *Assassin*, the unavoidable violence in *Hero*, beautifully exhibited as it were, is nevertheless always softened by the tone of color, by the settings of natural splendor, by the lyrical and agonistic music, and by the highly stylized performance. Setting aside the commercial appeal of the performance, the visual decoration of violence erases all historical verisimilitude, whereas it facilitates conveying the abstract discourse of “Tianxia.”

Fictive figures: imagined history

It merits attention that in all three films, fictive figures play a crucial role in constructing the whole narrative. Needless to say, all the characters appearing in the films are to some extent reconstructed, fabricated, and imagined. For the purpose of separating historicity from fictionality, it is necessary to distinguish two categories of the characters: the imagined and the fictive. In the category of the imagined are the characters who historically existed, yet are reinvented in the films. For instance, Ying Zheng, Gao Jianli, and Jing Ke, all can be found in *Shiji* and other historical records, which essentially form the basis for all kinds of narratives and representations in later

periods.²⁸³ They are basically the bearers of the double temporality consisting of past and present. The category of fictive characters means the invented figures who have no trace in history yet are created for the sake of cinematic narrative. For example, Yueyang, Lady Zhao, and all the assassins in *Hero*, are by any measure fictive characters invented to convey the ideas of the filmmakers. They bear the double temporality of present and future.

If the imagined assassins Jing Ke and Gao Jianli are representatives of the revolutionary force within the multitude, as Hardt and Negri would put it, the fictive characters are a rhetorical device to mediate the antagonism and to deliver the discourse of “Tianxia.” If the imagined characters bring to the present what has happened in the past, the fictive figures nonetheless suggest what would be the potential, the virtual, and the subversive problems in the future. In one sense, the narratives promote the empire logic for the promise of the future peace and abundance; in another sense, however, they at once criticize and justify the violent sacrifice in the present.

Needless to say, the history thus conveyed, diversified as such, has lost its historical context and been registered in multiple temporalities, manifesting itself in a displaced, compressed, and secondary-revisionary manner. On the one hand, due to the fictive figures and imagined portrayal, historical authenticity has ceased to be the focus of representation; on the other hand, the fusion of history and cinema gives more power to the image to display its historicity. To put it in another way, it is not the visualization of history, but rather, the historicization of visibility, to divert from the contemporary superficiality, to give the image a vertical structure, to manifest its historical depth. In this regard, the multiple representations of historical Empire not

²⁸³ The stories about Jing Ke and Gao Jianli can be found in *Shiji* and *Zhanguo ce*, which are constantly referred to by later writers and biographers.

only provide a unified, grandiose past for people to consume, but also constitute the reality for people to experience. The audience is not only led to *perceive* the historical Empire, but also *experience* it on the screen. The textual difference, revealed in these contemporaneous artifacts, thus, opens up a performative space, interacts with a much more complicated social context, and invites new possibilities to reconfigure relationships between past and present, China and the West.

National or global empire: timeless, universal history and nationalism?

In his book *Overcome by Modernity*, Harry Harootunian philosophizes on the rationality of Japan's "alternative modernity" during World War II. He argues that the Western influence and ever-changing modern life have generated an anxiety toward the fragmentation and superficiality of the modern, and brought to the fore the desire to create a concrete wholeness, a culture in contrast to commodity, and an aesthetics in opposition with politics. As a result, the ambiguous attitude of enjoying the fantasy of the modern and the desire to overcome the ephemeral modern leads to the projection onto the past, to create a concrete, universal, and timeless history conquering the modern. However, he continues, the collaboration of this timeless history with a market that ultimately turns history into commodity nevertheless manifests the final triumph of modernity. The attempt at overcoming proves to be nothing but being overcome in the end.²⁸⁴

This eye-opening argument, inspiring as it were, at first glance perfectly fits with the post/modern representation of history. As discussed above, the re-imagined, forged history has lost its historical context and been transformed into a visual commodity subject to consumption. The extreme example might be *Hero*. The highly

²⁸⁴ Harry Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000).

beautified visual appeal, the over-embellished imagination of traditional culture, the fictive figures, and the commercial operations from production to circulation, all contribute to constructing a timeless history without historical depth, and at the same time, satisfy the audience's exotic imagination of China, in both China and the West. Indeed, as a globalized martial arts film, *Hero* can be compared with Ang Lee's blockbuster *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in many ways. On the surface, it also fits well with Lee's interpretation of his creation of *Crouching Tiger*. For Lee, the film is his invention of ancient China, a world that does not exist anymore but remains in his imagination. Therefore, "[c]ulture, tradition, ethnicity, and 'Chineseness' for that matter," as Sheldon Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh put it, "are de-historicized, decontextualized, and disembedded from deep national roots. Chinese culture, in the form of martial arts or ethnic cuisine, becomes a portable package that travels, is carried over, and is ultimately consumed effortlessly from region to region across the globe—such is the state of cultural consumption and entertainment in the age of globalization."²⁸⁵ Yet, does it fully characterize *Hero* in the same manner? Or, does it mean the final triumph of the market? Can we apply the same commercial model to *Shadow* and *Assassin*?²⁸⁶

A close reading of the three films reveals that there is more than one version of history in the filmic representations. In fact, the textual difference in the three films, far from showing a homogeneous, universal, timeless history, rather manifests a complex reality with multiple perspectives. The extreme vision of these films either as

²⁸⁵ Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, "Introduction: Mapping the Field of Chinese-Language Cinema," in *Chinese Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 16.

²⁸⁶ Dai Jinhua, "Ci Qin xingdong," observes that even though three films all aim at the global market, *Shadow* and *Assassin* belong to the art film series, aiming at the European international film festival to show their artistic value and critical function; whereas *Hero* was aimed at the Oscar in Hollywood to expand its market channel for global distribution, which means that commercial production and circulation become the ultimate goal.

a subversive political act or as a constitutive player in the market is far from accurate and comprehensive. To overemphasize the power of the market risks undermining the trace of history, which articulates its depth disguised in historical symbols in contemporary visuality. On the other hand, to overemphasize the nationalistic sentiment manifest in historical representations overlooks the deconstructing power of the market, which has the potential to dissolve the subversive elements.

In this regard, the history thus represented, rather than being timeless or universal, is time-sensitive and historical-conscious. Instead of portraying a static history, the three films offer three different perspectives to look at the same historical event. They not only represent diachronic history, but themselves construct the synchronicity of history in the contemporary period. Displaying the dynamic interaction and reconciliation between the timely representation of history and its timelessness, the synchronicity suggests a middle ground bearing the historicity in the contemporary moment.

This middle ground, however, does echo Harootunian's assertion in the sense that it is symptomatic of the present social reality. The origin of the empire represented at the turn of the new century, showing the transition from chaos to order, from division to unification, from destitution to abundance, appears to mirror the contemporary social situation in a metaphorical way. With the intensification of market economy, the socialist social order is collapsing, while a fragmentary, uncertain social life and an ever-deepening anxiety arise. After the socialist work units underwent extensive privatization, the old sense of community has faced a tremendous challenge of destruction and reconstruction. Urbanization, migration, and commercialization have been breaking the old geopolitical boundaries and transforming the Chinese society into an unprecedented biopolitical place. Everyday life becomes even more transient and the only graspable reality is the hope for the

future. “Stability” and “harmony” have become the new government slogans accompanying the primary one, “development.” In this regard, unity and order, embodied in the historical Empire, seems to provide a symbolic, rhetorical, and optimistic cure in a transcendent way. If the assassination attempt signifies the immanent desire from the multitude to find security in the present, then the unification depicted at the conclusion offers an optimistic, powerful, and transcendent sovereignty promising the ultimate peace and order. If the tension played out in the romantic stories displays the anxiety over competition for scarce resources in reality, the discourse of “Tianxia” suggests cooperation for the assurance of unity and abundance in the future.

However, the unity desired is not as hierarchical as in the historical Empire, but rather leveled, manifesting a more egalitarian, transcendent flavor. The fact that all three films pay more attention to the rhetoric of “Tianxia” as moral justification and painstakingly dramatize sacrifice for unification exhibits the ambivalent encounter between the immanent desire and the transcendent order. This encounter, not only reveals itself within China, but projects outwardly and globally.

The turn of the new century has witnessed China’s rapid economic development and the newly emerged desire to recover the long lost national pride and past glory.²⁸⁷ On the other hand, the ever-changing global order refreshes people’s consciousness and conception of Empire. How to redefine Empire and re-envision its function in the world has caught world-wide scholars’ eyes and emerged as a hot topic of intellectual scrutiny.²⁸⁸ In this context, the reemergence of the Chinese Empire on

²⁸⁷ Dai Jinhua, “Ci Qin xingdong” (The action of assassinating the Qin emperor). A Talk at China Central Television Station (CCTV) on April 5, 2005. See <http://www.cctv.com/program/bjzt/topic/education/C13808/20050405/101615.shtml>.

²⁸⁸ For instance, *Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2000); and *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* by Peter J. Katzenstein (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2005) For a Chinese American scholar’s attention to this topic, see *Clash of Empires* by Lydia H. Liu (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

the cinematic screen serves to dramatize the confrontation between China and the West, the asymmetrical encounter between the symbolic and the political, economic power, and the ambivalent juxtaposition of national morality with global superpower.²⁸⁹

In his recent study on Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, Feng Lan situates the film into China's intellectual trend to revive the perspective of "Tianxia." He argues that the concept of "Tianxia" informs the ideological orientation and aesthetic features of Zhang Yimou's *Hero*. Taking "Tianxia" as the alternative to the modern order of nation states, and following the trend of asserting the legitimate role of Chinese culture in constructing a new global vision on the basis of a Chinese transnationalism, Zhang reinvents the martial arts film as a way to invigorate Chinese cinema in the international film market.²⁹⁰

In fact, in terms of commercial success, *Hero* could not compete with *Crouching Tiger* in the international market. It did not capture the Oscar that Zhang Yimou originally sought. Nevertheless, it overwhelmingly broke box-office records in mainland China. At a time when Hollywood films, instead of Chinese films, dominated the attention of Chinese audiences, *Hero* not only invigorated Chinese cinema in the international film market, but revived China's national cinema vis-à-vis the ascending hegemony of Hollywood films in China's domestic film market.²⁹¹

The Chinese audience's enthusiastic response to *Hero* was in sharp contrast to their initial reaction to *Shadow* and *Assassin*. In Spain, *Shadow* won the San Sebastian

²⁸⁹ Sensitive scholars might go so far as to assert that the benevolence conveyed in *Shadow* and *Assassin* is the demonstration of Confucian morality, which is the foundation of the stable Chinese Empire, and which is the unique cultural capital contrasting China to the West.

²⁹⁰ Feng Lan, "Zhang Yimou's *Hero*: Reclaiming the Martial Arts Film for 'All under Heaven'" in *Modern Chinese Language and Culture*, vol. 20, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 1-43.

²⁹¹ Sheldon Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, "Introduction: Mapping the Field of Chinese-Language Cinema" in *Chinese Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics*, ed. Sheldon Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 20.

Film Festival Jury Prize. *Assassin* was nominated for the Palme d'Or Award and finally did win the Technology Award in the Cannes International Film Festival. However, neither film received much attention in the domestic market. Only after the success of *Hero* did the audience start looking for videos of *Shadow* and *Assassin* and reevaluate the two films.²⁹² It is not news any more that the directors in China consciously let their films travel from China to the world and back to China again in order to get domestic attention. Yet generally Chinese audiences are used to giving a cold shoulder to the films which have won international film awards, films like *Yellow Earth* (by Chen Kaige), or *Not One Less* (by Zhang Yimou) that portray the Orientalist backwardness of China. The reactions the Chinese audience gave to Chinese films that have won international rewards reveal that there is a discrepancy between China's national imagination and global expectation. While most internationally awarded films cater to what global audiences want to see about China, these films cannot match the domestic audience's national imagination. The success of *Hero*, both domestically and globally, manifests the fusion of national imagination with global expectation about Chinese film at the turn of 21st century, even though from different perspectives.

Indeed, what *Hero* conveys is more than just transnational entertainment and pleasure. The diversified reactions it engenders from the critics—Orientalist Eurocentrism, Nationalist Sinocentrism, or authoritarianism, (not) guilty as charged²⁹³—place the film in the political areas of national identity, transnationality,

²⁹² See an online article, "Yang Jinsong: Chen Kaige *Jingke ci Qinwang* de beiju" (Yang Jinsong: The tragedy of Chen Kaige's *Emperor and Assassin*), in which the author reveals that because of *Hero*, the film *Assassin* got more attention after its initial failure several years before. Published on www.sina.com.cn, April 11, 2005, see <http://ent.sina.com.cn/r/m/2005-04-11/1642700094.html>.

²⁹³ Refer to Tzu-hsiu Chiu, "Public Secrets: Geopolitical Aesthetics in Zhang Yimou's *Hero*," published on *E-ASPAC: An Electronic Journal of Asian Studies on the Pacific Coast*, May, 2004. See <http://mcel.pacificu.edu/easpac/2005/tzuchiu.php3>. The article addresses the dialectics of "Orientalist Eurocentrism" and "Chinese Nationalist Sinocentrism." Also refer to Robert Y. Eng "Is *Hero* a Paean to Authoritarianism?", which challenges those who argue that the hit martial arts film celebrates authoritarianism. Published online in *Asian Media—Media News Daily*. September 7, 2004. See <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=14371>.

globalization, national imagination and the understanding of the emerging global order. Meanwhile, *Shadow* and *Assassin* add differential temporalities to what *Hero* conveys, complicating the asymmetrical encounter between China and the West in a globalized culture. The painstakingly portrayed complex of power and moral justification in three films, ambivalently lingering within and beyond a national boundary, manifests the contemporary consciousness and anxiety to resituate and re-imagine China in global topography. As Dai Jinhua pointed out:

Since the 1990s, during the process of rapid economic reform and participation in globalization, China's self imagination has ceased to dwell on self-criticism or reminders of national crisis, but on attention to strengthening the country so as to participate in globalization or the global village as a strong nation state. ... Artists and filmmakers, their self imagination, their self identification, have gone beyond identifying with the symbolic assassin, but rather with the Emperor who founded the powerful and unified empire. This is the change in the imagination of China [compared to the 1980s].²⁹⁴

It is questionable that the Emperor is the only person to identify with. As discussed above, Gao Jianli and Lady Zhao are both heroes in *Shadow* and *Assassin*. However, as far as the imagination of China is concerned, the discourse of “Tianxia” deserves more attention. And Tan Dun's opera comes to the fore. In the Met-commissioned, internationally-made epic opera *The First Emperor*, as in the film *Shadow*, “Tianxia” is articulated in the anthem sung by the prisoners who are captured to build the Great Wall. The grandiose music is synthetic, the language is English plus Chinese, and the performers are nationally diverse. “Tianxia” resides in the heart of the people. It transcends the national, cultural boundaries, and reveals its centuries-long, historically-tested moral power.

²⁹⁴ Dai Jinhua, “Ci Qin xingdong.” She compared the representations of history in the 1980s with that in the 1990s, suggesting that in the 1980s the vision of history was more self-critical, whereas in the 1990s, it became more self-reassuring. For instance, the original plan during the 1980s for the film *Shadow* was to portray Gao as the heroic protagonist, and the title of the film was supposed to be *Bloody Zhu*, yet the emphasis was shifted in the final version of *Shadow* in 1996.

In both *Empire* by Hardt and Negri, and *A World of Regions* by Peter Katzenstein, the authors discuss the emergence of global empire (American imperium as Katzenstein defines it) and its function in the contemporary world.²⁹⁵ The emphasis on non-territorial power as manifested in its moral justification shaping the new world order poses the major challenge in redefining empire. In this light, is the rhetoric of “Tianxia” a responsive counterpart to American ideological power or a submissive collaboration with the new world order, or both?

²⁹⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2000); and Peter J. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

“Minxin—Tianxia”: Emperors in Contemporary Novels

The history of empire cannot be merely political, military and diplomatic. Economy is crucial and so too is culture. In the long run the strength and attractiveness of an empire’s culture will contribute greatly to its longevity and its influence. Imperial ideologies are both fascinating in themselves and vital to empire’s survival.

---- Dominic Lieven: *Empire*

In comparison with cinema, novels and TV series have more capacity to describe the entire history of an emperor and his associated empire. On the other hand, while the films could be shown to both the global and domestic audience—for instance, all three films on Emperor Qin Shihuang were aimed at obtaining international film awards—voluminous historical novels and lengthy TV series mainly targeted the Chinese-reading audience on account of the requirement of familiarity with the historical contexts and the unavailability of translation. In other words, film could project an empire image outwardly, while novels and TV series produced the imperial images inwardly and meanwhile, catered to and shaped popular taste and expectations.

At a time when economic development as well as globalized culture gradually fragments the established social structure and de-sublimates the revolutionary narrative, the emergence of historical novels nonetheless provides a counter-revolutionary yet more historically-rooted discourse, one that presents unity and abundance in both material and spiritual senses. That means, the material scarcity due to keen competition in the market, the spiritual emptiness owing to the lack of a sublimated ideal, the uncontrollable confusion resulting from the intensive social transition, all find a solution, or refuge, in the historical novels. Not that the “empire

narrative” projects an idealistic fantasy image which leads people to turning away from reality, but that it mirrors reality in the sense of providing reassuring precedents in history that “we have been there before, everything will be fine as long as we....” Such a corrective portrayal of history functions not so much to criticize reality as to articulate the transcendent notion of “Minxin-Tianxia.” In other words, even though historical novels manifest the temporality of the present, they are not so much pragmatic solutions to the current crisis as they are reassurances of a sense of universal truth transcending any time and space. Meanwhile, the detailed portrayal of powerful struggles and social contexts epitomizes the empirical situation and the richness of Chinese culture. Hence, the “empire narrative” overall bears a double structure as both transcendental and empirical, with the transcendental organizing the empirical and the empirical containing the transcendental.

Indeed, historical novels on imperial China, especially the so-called “serious” ones, in this period are mostly based on official historical records, emanating a sense of the “harmonious, continuous, taken-for-granted” gloss conducive to a popular grasp of history and social stability. As Wu Jianren articulated almost a century ago, historical novels ought to “imply education in idle conversations so that the reader could have the benefit (of historical knowledge) from entertainment and pleasure,”²⁹⁶ contemporary historical novels divulge more than ever the intimate life of the emperors, providing readers with detailed portrayal of historical knowledge, including diversified social customs, complicated rituals, exquisite lifestyles, and politico-economic interactions among court, family, and market spaces, on top of the well-known historical events. Moreover, most novels adopt a traditional episodic narrative structure. With or without the couplet separating the chapters, the relationship between

²⁹⁶ Wu Jianren, “Liang Jin yanyi xu” (Preface to the yanyi of Western and Eastern Jin dynasties). In *Wu Jianren quanji* (The complete collection of Wu Jianren’s works), Vol 4, 257.

the chapters is more spatial than temporal. It means that the novels present a large number of characters in a variety of settings and plots, and the shift of chapters as often as not indicates a change of setting and plot rather than the temporal development of one single plot. As discussed in the previous chapter, such a narrative form—what Lin Qinxin characterizes as “spatial narrative”—manifests the dialectic between time and space, which is the intrinsic and long lasting tradition of Chinese empire narrative.

The images of the emperors

Two types of emperors were portrayed in this period: the successful ones and the failed ones. In the popular representation, the successful ones are usually those who possess insurmountable wisdom and virtue associated with political achievement and glory; the failed ones are usually associated with love stories and troublesome romances that affect the emperor’s political accomplishment.²⁹⁷ Of course, the boundary between them is not that clear-cut—the successful emperors also have romantic encounters and devoted lovers, yet they never surrender their political mission to their private desire. They would either sacrifice their own love if the political atmosphere does not allow it or direct it to the positive function for the empire. For successful rulers, besides Eryuehe and Ling Li’s novels on the Qing emperors, as well the representations of Qin Shihuang, Han Wudi, Tang Taizong, Yuan Shizu Genghis Khan, Ming Taizu, etc., on television, there are also Yang Shuan’s *Qin E yi* (Memoirs of Qin E) on Qin Shihuang, and Wu Yinyi’s series on Tang Xuanzong (Li Longji). For the failed rulers, there are Huo Ran’s *Fengliu tianzi Li houzhū* (The romantic emperor Li Yu), Yang Shuan’s *Ban jiang se se ban jiang*

²⁹⁷ Wang Aisong, *Zhengzhi shuxie yu lishi xushi* (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 2007), 256.

hong on Sui Yangdi, Wang Hongru's *Sheng tang yi hen* (The eternal regret of the Great Tang Empire) on Tang Xuanzong, and Yan Tingrui's *Bianjing fengsao* (The story of Bianjing) on Song Shenzong, et cetera. Generally speaking, literature about the former type of emperor gained more attention and was regarded as "serious" representation of the emperors.

One common characteristic about the so-called "serious" historical representations is that they all focus on the most successful emperors and their intimate associates, by and large family-centered, which undoubtedly reflects the traditional Chinese value promoting the homology of state with family, and which also makes explicit the built-in disadvantage of such a family-centered political structure. For instance, Emperors Qin Shihuang, Han Wudi, Tang Taizong, Yuan Shizu, Qing Shunzhi, Qing Kangxi, Qing Yongzheng, and Qing Qianlong all start their lives as successful rulers through their active roles within imperial families, and the most urgent task they have to accomplish in the beginning is to build up their legitimacy and authority within the family. Moreover, the emperors all seize power at crucial moments of the dynasties, either at the start of the dynasty or the ascending period of the dynasty. They all experience a time of transition from chaos to order, at the least having to appease a power struggle within the imperial family in order to stabilize their authority. In some sense, these are the *bildung* or coming of age narratives of the emperors. The emperors are for the most part portrayed as ordinary people with common traits and shortcomings, but with extraordinary strength or wisdom. After enduring and overcoming remarkable pressure and anxiety, they usually grow up, mentally and psychologically, to become powerful, wise, and great heroes for people to consume and identify with.

Foundational fiction: Ling Li's novels on Qing emperors

Ling Li's series of "One hundred years of resplendence" comprises three novels. *Qing cheng qing guo* (Topple the city and overthrow the kingdom) is on the transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasties associated with the last Ming Emperor Chongzhen and the first Qing Emperor Taizong Hong Taiji. *Shaonian tianzi* (Youthful son of heaven) presents the Shunzhi Emperor. *Mu gu chen zhong* (Evening drum and morning bell) is an account of the Kangxi Emperor in his youth. As a scholar of the imperial history of Qing dynasty, Ling Li, pen name of Zeng Lili, considered the ascending period of the Qing Empire as one of the most glorious time periods in Chinese history, and it is through the aforementioned three Qing emperors that the empire achieved unity and stability after the fall of Ming.

Besides the encyclopedic scope of these novels, the series accentuates the theme of unification and consolidation in both military and civil senses. The contradictions between the corrupt Ming and the promising Qing, between the military Manchu and the civil Han, and between the nobles and the ordinary people are played out, dramatized, and finally resolved.

Qing cheng qing guo places the scholarly general of the Ming Dynasty Sun Yuanhua and his subordinates in the midst of the political intrigue in the Ming Court and the military encounter between the Ming and the Qing to imply the causation of the fall of the Ming and triumph of the Qing.²⁹⁸ Almost a perfect figure in the novel, loyal, virtuous, capable, far-sighted and wholeheartedly admired by his subordinates, Sun Yuanhua is victimized by the complicated political struggle in the Ming court and finally executed by the seemingly wise yet in effect confused Emperor Chongzhen. His subordinate officer Kong Youde is forced to surrender to the Qing after his dream of becoming a great general in the Ming is smashed. The novel portrays the paranoid,

²⁹⁸ Ling Li, *Qing cheng qing guo* (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1996).

suspicious Emperor Chongzhen, the corrupt officials and eunuchs of the Ming, in contrast to the rising power of the Qing under the ambitious, clear-sighted, embracing Emperor Hong Taiji. Unlike the historical plays in the 1930s and 1940s dramatizing ethnic encounters and emphasizing unity from within the Chinese, this novel takes a more detached stance, from a panoramic perspective retelling the assertion that the Ming fell because it lost the hearts of the people and the Qing continued its mission to consolidate all under Heaven. Hong Taiji is a hero since he understands that “in order to gain ‘Tianxia’ (all under Heaven), (the ruler) has to gain the people’s hearts.”²⁹⁹ Similar understanding is proved true later from the bottom-up perspective in a final statement of an ordinary young soldier, Lu Qiyi, before his premature death:

“We ordinary people, common soldiers, don’t know [the obligations between] the despot, officials, and the like. Whoever treats us well, we pay him back with the same; whoever treats us badly, we are not going to have any concern for him either!” (494)

Here the abstract notion of loyalty or narrowly-defined nationalism begs the reciprocal responsibility, and first of all, the obligation of the emperor to his subjects.

The same theme of “Minxin-Tianxia” (people’s heart-all under Heaven) is continually rearticulated in the novels *Shaonian tianzi* and *Mu gu chen zhong* to show how the Qing emperors Shunzhi and Kangxi solve the contradictions between the Manchu and the Han and win the hearts of all under Heaven to stabilize their rule. Both novels move the focus from political periphery (as in *Qing cheng qing guo*) to the political center—the imperial family and court. *Shaonian tianzi* represents the difficulty and obstacles the young emperor Shunzhi faces when he tries to incorporate the Han culture into his Manchu rule. The Manchu nobles attempt to maintain their privilege, relentlessly expropriating the land and executing their Han slaves, while the

²⁹⁹ Ling Li, *Qing cheng qing guo* (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1996), 476.

teenaged emperor admires the Han civilization and desires to be a benevolent emperor.³⁰⁰

The Han-Manchu contradiction not only manifests itself in court debate between officials, among the late Ming literati scholars, in the village, but also in the imperial palace. The half-Manchu-half-Han Lady Dong'e (Dongeh) captures the whole heart of the emperor for her delicate, refined southern manner and high literary talent, which inevitably puts her in the hot water of jealousy and intrigues among the Mongol- or Manchu-born imperial concubines. Her little son dies of such kind of hatred and she herself finally pines away. Losing his love and frustrated by the Manchu nobles, the initially reform-minded emperor appears impatient and disillusioned. He at first shaves his head, announcing his intention to be a Buddhist monk, but is later persuaded by the imperial teacher Yulin to resume taking up the affairs of state. Yet the fatal disease smallpox soon after defeats the emperor and he dies prematurely at age twenty-four.

Mu gu chen zhong continues the story to the next emperor, Kangxi. Ascending to the throne at age seven, the young emperor's life unfolds against a background of social upheaval as Ming resistance still exists and the Qing is struggling to strengthen its foundation.³⁰¹ Young, ambitious, and obviously brilliant, Kangxi finds himself hemmed in by four Manchu regents, who deny emperor Shunzhi's reform proposals and rekindle the Manchu-Han conflicts. In order to become a great emperor comparable to the past sage-rulers, he forces himself to grow up quickly so as to reduce the power of these Manchu nobles. At age sixteen he cleverly imprisons the overpowering regent Aobai and wipes away all the obstacles for his independent rule, thus beginning to establish a great epoch of the Chinese empire.

³⁰⁰ Ling Li, *Son of Heaven*, trans. David Kwan, (Beijing: Chinese Literature Press, 1995).

³⁰¹ Ling Li, *Shaonian Kangxi* (the title of *Mu gu chen zhong* when the novel was published in Taiwan) (Taipei: Guojicun wenku shudian, 1993).

One characteristic in all three novels is that they develop the stories around the Han-Manchu contradiction and, without exception, intertwine romances with political struggles. In fact, romance as an imagined element parallels politics, annotating the unspeakable cruelty of politics. Representations of pure, beautiful, ideal matches strangled or destroyed by political turmoil, the romantic stories demonstrate the brutality of the counter-productive force manifested in the dynastic transition. Only by overcoming this force can the protagonists become heroes. Unlike the conventional accounts of imperial romances in the past dynasties that alienate the emperor's passion from the affairs of the state, for instance, romance between the Tang Emperor Xuanzong and his favorite concubine Lady Yang, romance in Ling Li's novels appears to be a positive, productive force for the unity and stability of the empire. Romance is more projection than retrospection, more imaginary than realistic.

In her *Foundational Fictions*, Doris Sommer analyses the romantic novels in Latin America in the nineteenth century. Unlike the romances in the European tradition in which the triangulated desire among lovers usually leads to the tragic ending in the personal love affairs, the romances in Latin America appear to be the unbridled passion between lovers, and the success or the failure of their love mirrors the political situation of the nation. The marriage between *eros* and *polis* hence implies the ideal picture of the nation.³⁰²

In this light, the union between the lovers in Ling Li's novels projects the ultimate blueprint of the empire, in which productive romance functions as the imaginary force that grounds the (ideal) imperial family. However, unlike the Latin American romances, the Chinese "empire narrative" usually places romance as the temporary foil of the growth of the hero, an essential, physical, and psychological

³⁰² Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991).

stage that the hero has to pass through. Therefore, the forces that sabotage the romantic union turn out to be the obstacles that the heroes have to conquer for the sake of the future empire. Romantic passion is not the end of the hero's life; rather, it ignites, incites, and matures the hero's vision of how to develop, to improve, and to consolidate the empire.

For instance, in *Qing cheng qing guo*, the love story between the literati officer Lǚ Lie (later Lǚ Zhiyue) and General Sun Yuanhua's daughter Youfan epitomizes the political turmoil during the transition of Ming-Qing dynasties. The couple fall in love at first sight yet can only be reunited almost twenty years later. The Ming separates them yet the Qing joins them. Their detachment from the Ming and reattachment to the Qing therefore manifest the emotional propensity toward two regimes, indirectly legitimizing the rule of the Qing.

In *Shaonian tianzi*, the unrestrained passion between the young Emperor Shunzhi and Lady Dong'e (Black Pearl) pictures a perfect union of Manchu and Han, martial and civil, rigidity and gentleness, enthusiasm and rationality, which projects an ideal image of the future empire the young emperor dreams of establishing. Yet the ethnic discrimination, jealousy, and scheming, together with illness, take away Lady Dong'e's life, which simultaneously foretells the collapse of the emperor's radical reform attempt.

Similarly, in *Mu gu chen zhong*, the pitiful love between the adolescent Emperor Kangxi and Icy Moon suggests the necessity and importance of balance among different power groups in order to maximally consolidate the newly founded empire. Like Baoyu and Daiyu in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Kangxi and Icy Moon grow up together with genuine care for and telepathic understanding of each other. Ideal soul mate for the young emperor, Icy Moon unfortunately appears to be Kangxi's cousin from the same imperial clan. Even though she is actually the product

of an unidentifiable prince of the Ming Dynasty and a Han woman of lowly origin, both her official and her real identity make it impossible to tie the marriage knot between them. Far from being an independent emperor who can choose his love by free will at the time, young Kangxi learns to submit his personal desire to the responsibility for the empire when the two are in temporary contradiction. In a sense, romantic passion is the necessary obstacle he has to overcome in order to grow up, to surpass his father Emperor Shunzhi, and to become a greater emperor to continually glorify the empire. When his request to marry Icy Moon is refused by the Empress Dowager he sinks into ambivalent musings:

What he wanted was both to be an emperor and have Icy Moon. Icy Moon could help him become a good emperor.

Yet, given it was impossible to get both, what should he choose?

To lose Icy Moon would leave him heartbroken, no way to make up the loss and pain, and no way to have so real a love for the rest of his life;

Yet if he gave up the throne, could he be content with living his life as a commonplace man without any great accomplishment? ...He should remember what the imperial grandma told him: what he shoulders is the cause handed down from his ancestors, the great empire with boundless territories, and millions of people!³⁰³

Sacrifice is indispensable and unavoidable, which makes him at once a human of flesh and blood and a super-human who can transcend personal love or hate for the future of the empire. Like the union of Emperor Shunzhi and Lady Dong'e, the love between Kangxi and Icy Moon is as much productive and positive for the empire, yet the practical situation makes it an ideal unity for the future rather than for the present.

Thus romance takes on the quality is the projection in Ling Li's novels, so that it mirrors the social condition in the early Qing dynasty when the Manchu-Han consolidation is on the horizon yet the ultimate unity is yet to be accomplished. It is also noteworthy that in all three novels the female characters are idealized in such a

³⁰³Ling Li, *Shaonian Kangxi* (Taipei: Guojicun wenku shudian, 1993), Vol 2, 746.

way that they embody not only the future unified empire but also the melting-pot of Chinese civilization. Youfan, Black Pearl, and Icy Moon were all born into influential families significant enough to impact the fate of the empire, and they are all uncontaminatedly innocent, learned, talented, and virtuous, not only being sincere about personal love, but also deeply concerned about the people and the empire. Youfan, daughter of the Confucian-Christian literati general, practices Chinese medicine for the people in need and, at a time when his father's troop is deprived of subsidy and the soldiers are at the edge of revolt, she would rather trade herself to collect the stipend for the troop. Her love transcends ethnic, cultural boundaries and to the people appears to be an all-embracing benevolence. As a baptized Christian, she loves even more broadly than the Christian missionary Tang Ruowang (Tang Jo-Wang)—the learned German Jesuit Adam Schall von Bell who never forgets his mission and disapproves other religious doctrines and practices. As Lü Lie comments on his wife, only Youfan's medicine proves the genuine love and benevolence to the people that transcends any political, ethnic, and cultural limits to save lives.³⁰⁴ By the same token, Black Pearl and Icy Moon are as much the epitome of the ethnic and cultural unity as Youfan. They have both the Manchu and Han origins, are talented, well read, versed in Confucian teaching, yet also embrace the Buddhist and Christian principles. They represent the all encompassing ideal of the future empire that is yet to come.

Meanwhile, the ambivalent reception of Tang Ruowang (the Jesuit Adam Schall von Bell) represents China's early encounter with the West. The presence of Tang and his foreign friends not only foretells the later Western imperialist ambition, but also reminds one of China's increasing technological backwardness by the late Ming dynasty. A devoted Christian missionary and a dispenser of Western sciences,

³⁰⁴ Ling Li, *Qing cheng qing guo*. 661.

Tang at once attracts and repulses Chinese with his knowledge and belief. Successfully befriended by some influential members of the Chinese elite and even by emperors, he is nonetheless frustrated by the Chinese's all-embracing attitude toward religion. It is hard to ask the Chinese to follow the rule of monogamy, even harder to persuade them to believe in only one God. The frustrating experience of Tang, on the one hand, manifests the assimilative, inclusive, and centripetal quality of Chinese civilization; on the other hand, however, as a court official in charge of astronomy and calendric affairs, Tang's tragic death during Kangxi's reign suggests the brutal suppression of the development of science by conservative forces, which foreshadows the decline of the empire in the global arena by the late Qing period.

Although the three novels present independent stories about different heroes, they could be seen as a serial narrative on one hundred years of early Qing history. They share some common characters. Among them there are influential ones who are crucial for the imperial family and the development of the empire, functioning as witness and the participants in the growing empire. There are also some imagined characters who link the court with commoner families, transgressing the social spaces and creating suspense to generate dramatic effect. For the former, Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang, Lü Zhiyue, and Tang Ruowang, all from different perspectives view the temporal trajectory of the empire. For the latter, imagined people such as Menggu and Tongchun, Menggu's lost twin daughters Icy Moon and Shiny River (Yingchuan), and the half-Manchu-half-Han boy Feiyaose, all travel across different social spaces, from the village to the noble household, even to the imperial palace. They encounter people from different social backgrounds, and thus interweave the diversified spaces into one single imperial space. In other words, the influential historical figures provide the vertical, temporal structure for the novels, yet the imagined characters construct the

horizontal, spatial structure, introducing the multifaceted social image of late imperial China.

Moreover, the concealed identity among the relevant characters creates tensions, suspense, and secrets to intensify the dramatic effect to attract the readers. For instance, in *Shaonian tianzi*, Menggu and Tongchun are deeply in love. In order to marry Menggu, Tongchun leaves his profession as an opera performer playing young females, only to find out that Menggu has been married off by her mother to the self-appointed Prince of Ming. Both Menggu and Tongchun suffer tremendously in their separate tragic lives, yet still bear the unfulfilled desire to see each other. Following that, in *Mu gu chen zhong*, both Menggu and Tongchun are by chance employed in the same household of the Manchu Prince An, yet they don't recognize each other until a later time. Similarly, Icy Moon is one of Menggu's lost daughters, adopted by Prince An. While Menggu is hired as the nanny of the little girl, who is particularly attached to her, neither of them knows their real relationship. On the other hand, Icy Moon's twin sister Shiny River is adopted by Lü Zhiyue. The lost trace of Shiny River after adoption unavoidably generates curiosity, especially against the backdrop of Icy Moon's prominent existence.

Stories like these extend across the volumes of the novels. The omniscient narrator constantly creates suspense and secrets. Sometimes the information is concealed from the readers yet revealed to the characters, and sometimes the secret is revealed to the readers yet concealed from the characters. Such manipulation undoubtedly draws the reader's attention, not only dramatizes these otherwise irrelevant and insignificant affairs, but also consolidates the separate novels into an organic whole, awaiting the unfolding of more secrets in the unknown future.

In sum, Ling Li adopts a developmentalistic perspective, inserts the early Qing dynasty in the current of Chinese history accompanied with a global vision, and

parallels the political struggle with productive romances to project a unified, prosperous, powerful, all-encompassing image of the Chinese empire, an image that is both retrospection and projection, both historical and timeless, both individual and collective, and both hero-centered and self-effacing.

Assemblage of Chinese traditional culture: Eryuehe's "Emperor Series"

Following Ling Li's early Qing emperors, Eryuehe's "trilogy of the evening glow" portrays the most flourishing era during the reigns of emperors Kangxi (Aisin Gioro Xuanye 1654-1722), Yongzheng (Aisin Gioro Yinzhen 1678-1735), and Qianlong (Aisin Gioro Hongli 1711-1799) of the Qing dynasty. Titled eponymously "*Kangxi da di*" (Great emperor Kangxi), "*Yongzheng huangdi*" (Emperor Yongzheng) and "*Qianlong huangdi*" (Emperor Qianlong), the novels are apparently focused on the three emperors' lives and the great accomplishments associated with them.

From the mid-1980s when Eryuehe, pen name of Ling Jiefang, started publishing historical novels, his "emperor series" gradually attracted broad attention and, thanks to the television dramas adapted from his novels, his name became widely known among the Chinese audience in East Asia. Eryuehe adopted traditional episodic narrative structure with couplets that introduce the chapters and divide them into two stories, and skillfully interlaced different types of life experience, including power intrigues, romantic affairs, erotic encounters, and unexpected successes and failures in political careers, that successfully create a microcosmic social picture of the Qing dynasty that meets both the elitist and popular tastes of the readers.

Obviously influenced by the traditional narrative techniques, especially that of *the Dream of the Red Chamber*,³⁰⁵ Eryuehe consciously makes use of witty

³⁰⁵ Eryuehe used to devote himself to studying the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and he admitted that he was deeply influenced by it. See Feng Xingge et al, eds. *Jujiao "huangdi zuojia" Eryuehe* (Focus on the "emperor writer" Eryuehe), (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2003).

conversations, insinuated jokes, meaningful poetry, and suggestive riddles associated with different characters and situations to intensify the contradictions, dramatize the seemingly plain circumstances, and make explicit the relationships among the characters. Furthermore, the wide employment of literary devices such as foreshadowing, backshadowing, sideshadowing, suspense, irony, and secrets, weaves together the historical and the fictional, the comic and the tragic, and the mysterious and the fated. Such a narrative strategy incorporates the multifaceted elements into a well-structured, centralized theme—the emperor and the empire, and draws out the reader’s emotional identification to prevent boredom reading these voluminous novels.

As Eryuehe confessed about his own writing, he treated his work as a “four-knurl lotus root.” That means, he invested his energy evenly into different aspects of the novel, such as the patterning of narrative structure, design of legendary plots, descriptive portrayal of anecdotes, construct of poems, medical prescriptions, and riddles, et cetera, and made all the aspects interconnected yet relatively independent. One failed aspect would not affect the entire quality of the novel, in the sense that one rotten part of the lotus root would not keep other parts from being edible.³⁰⁶ Such an encyclopedic yet non-elitist approach makes his novels appealing to people of diversified tastes, at once centralizing and decentering the readership in his “emperor narrative.”

Indeed, the lengthy series could be seen as a well-structured assemblage of traditional Chinese culture, in which elements from the Confucian literati-elitist culture, Buddhist and Daoist philosophical influences, pragmatic power-money exchange, entertainment and pleasure seeking activities, male and female knight-errant legends, and so on and so forth, are intertwined and blended together, rendering the novel an exciting display of imperial culture. The selection and combination of the

³⁰⁶Feng Xingge et al, eds. *Jujiao “huangdi zuojia” Eryuehe*, 262.

traditional cultural elements on the one hand mirror contemporary diversified culture of the late twentieth century, insinuating that the world has not fundamentally changed in terms of social relations; on the other hand, however, the temporal distance endows the past culture with a gloss of unity, concentrated on the emperor under the omnipresent rubric of “da yi tong” (grand Unity or great Harmony).

As in Ling Li’s novels, the transcendent notion of “Tianxia” functions as an “invisible hand,” organizing and consolidating the empirical situation and the otherwise fragmented elements, showcasing the complexity and richness of Chinese culture enshrined in the unifying imperial thinking. For instance, in *Great Emperor Kangxi*, the scene in which Kangxi runs into Wu Ciyou at the Daoist Baiyun Temple is dramatic and metaphorical. It employs poems, jokes, allusions, and puns to reveal their concealed identity and respective character as well as intersubjective relations, transforming a tense meeting into a leisurely encounter.

Accompanied by Wei Dongting, officer of the imperial guards, and Banbuershan, the Manchu noble who is planning a coup with Aobai to overthrow Kangxi’s throne, the fifteen-year-old emperor is visiting Baiyun Temple in order to sound out Banbuershan’s attitude and persuade him to leave Aobai’s network. Since the moment they approach the temple, Kangxi has grasped every opportunity to use allusions to investigate Banbuershan’s mentality. The rich history of the temple provides him with plenty of seemingly aimless topics: from the *Dao* (Way) of the emperor to the *Dao* (Way) of the robber, from the Ming Emperor Zhengde’s couplet expressing the theme of “respecting Heaven and loving the people” to the heavy cauldron as the symbol of the imperial power, Kangxi constantly initiates the discussion to probe into Banbuershan’s mind. However, pretending being unaware of the emperor’s real intention, Banbuershan only responds at a superficial level.

At this moment, the emperor and his subordinates bump into Wu Ciyou and Kangxi's imperial maid Sumalagu. Having been the emperor's private tutor arranged by another official, Wu Ciyou nonetheless does not know the real identity of the emperor. He was told that this pupil is just a well sheltered young master from a wealthy family. Except for Banbuershan, the emperor and his guard and maid all know the secret. Intending to continue concealing the emperor's identity, Wei Dongting first introduces the emperor and Banbuershan to Wu Ciyou as Mr. Zhen Longming (甄龙鸣) and Mr. Jia Zicai (贾子才), the phonetic puns of "real dragon howling" and "fake talented scholar" respectively, and introduces Wu Ciyou as his own cousin. Wu Ciyou immediately understands the situation that he needs to hide his own and his pupil's identity, the one that he knows. However, as the puns suggest, the concealing of the concealing is in effect revealing, even though Wu Ciyou is still masked from reality.

After the introduction, five people continue their trip and discussion in the temple. At one point, they decide to compose rhymes extemporaneously to add to the fun. In one *jueju* poem portraying a carp jumping out of the water, they each contribute one line to complete the poem. It reads like this:

Kangxi:	Shiny scales in the narrow pool spring out of the shadow of the cloud 剑池锦鳞跃云影
Wu Ciyou:	Breaking the autumn sky in order to demonstrate their shape 击破秋空欲出形
Wei Dongting:	To ask Heaven about destiny 为问天阙造化数
Banbuershan:	Slicing through a clear wave to salute the golden dragon 划乱清波朝金龙! ³⁰⁷

Here the underlying image is of the carp springing over the dragon gate, an image that conventionally alludes to the ultimate success of a person from ordinary origin,

³⁰⁷ Eryuehe, *Kangxi da di—duo gong* (The great Emperor Kangxi—struggle for the throne), Vol 1. (Zhengzhou: Huanghe wenyi chubanshe, 1985), 199-200.

especially that of a scholar who succeeds the civil exam or gets the emperor's recognition for his talent. The carp represents the person with exceptional ability, and the dragon symbolizes the emperor. Although the poem is far from an excellent one, each line nonetheless indirectly describes the respective character according to their relative status. The emperor is observing, simply telling what he sees; Wu Ciyou expresses the ambition of an unemployed, talented scholar; Wei Dongting cares about his own future as a loyal guard from a lowly origin; and Banbuershan exhibits the flattering attitude toward the emperor, suggesting that it is only the emperor, rather than Heaven, that determines one's fate.

Not knowing the emperor's identity, Wu Ciyou satirizes Banbuershan's line and delivers his critical opinion of the flattering conceit. Stating that poetry should be expressing one's real spirit and genuine emotions, he then recites a poem to convey his desire and anxiety in the hope of a wise emperor's recognition. The poem is full of past allusions to the ideal relationship between emperors and their advisors, a relationship that goes beyond the normal lord-servant association, and is rather more interdependent, mutually admiring, more of the egalitarian relationship of a confidant. Such a poem implies the double constraints for both the emperor and the advisor, for that ideal relationship depends on mutual recognition, which means, the talented scholar would only serve the capable emperor who is worth serving, and who is destined to achieve the great accomplishment. In this sense, the poem reveals Wu Ciyou's confidence, ambition, and expectation, yet also his ambivalent feeling about serving the emperor.

Afraid of exposing the secret of the emperor's identity, Wei Dongting cleverly changes the topic, suggesting that they tell jokes instead of composing poems to relax the atmosphere. Still remembering Wu Ciyou's criticism, Banbuershan first tells a joke about a skilful writer:

A skilful writer died. He went to see the King of Hell, and at that moment the King of Hell farted. This scholar then wrote an essay titled “On Farting.” It reads like this: “Your highness lifts your noble hips releasing a kind of precious gas, which sounds like the lyrical music from silk and bamboo, and smells like the fragrant scent of orchid and muskiness. I, your servant, standing at your leeward, cannot be honored more than with this incredible aroma!” The King of Hell was so happy that he granted him another dozen years of life. Twelve years later when his life expectation expired, the scholar came to salute the King again. He held his head high entering into the palace, yet the King had forgotten him. Upon being questioned who he was, the writer said: “I am the one who wrote the (worthless) essay ‘On Farting.’” (*pi wen zhang* 屁文章) (201)

According to the context, this joke is designed to mock scholars like Wu Ciyou, who is versed in writing. Rather than being offended, Wu nevertheless responds cheerfully: “Mr. Jia Zicai [fake scholar] is unexpectedly a real scholar. He uses only one joke to scold all the flatterers in the world.” The joke turns into a barb aimed back at the praising attitude Banbuershan expressed in his poem a moment before. Relaxing as the atmosphere seems, the tension between Wu Ciyou and Banbuershan is in effect escalated through the laughter.

Following this joke, Wei Dongting also contributes one on farting:

There was a person called Chen Quan in the Ming Dynasty, who was a famous Casanova with knowledge. One day he mistakenly walked into the imperial hunting field and was captured by a eunuch. The eunuch said to him: “You are Chen Quan, who is said to be good at telling jokes. If you say only one character that can make me laugh, I will release you.” Chen Quan promptly responded: “fart!” Confused by the answer, the eunuch asked for an explanation. Chen then replied: “It is up to you whether you want to release [me] or not.” (201)

Vulgar as it sounds, this joke nevertheless matches Wei’s status and philosophy of life. As Kangxi’s nanny’s son, Wei is both the subordinate and the intimate friend of the emperor. His prestigious yet dependent situation determines that he has to be extremely careful and absolutely subservient.

On the other side, Wu Ciyou's joke is about the psychological burden of status and fame, which reveals his conflicting view on whether he should be pursuing a political career to gain reputation, foreshadowing his later decision to become a recluse after learning the emperor's real identity. The joke, however, only insinuates this in a ridiculously funny way:

There was a rich family that originated from the lowly status of entertainers. After the mother died, the son decided to solicit a composition for the memorial tablet of the mother for people to worship. The description was to be grandiose, including two characters "*qin feng*" (entitled by the emperor 钦奉), yet truthful enough. So the son offered one thousand *liang* of silver, only to find out that no one could write such a memorial tablet. Luckily there was a skilful writer—must be the one Mr. Jia just talked about—who did not know how to kill his time and took the job. Without thinking hard, he nevertheless wrote effortlessly on the tablet: "This is the memorial tablet of Granny Liu, neighbor of the servant of Prime Minister Wang, whom the Emperor has titled 'Great Scholar in the Council of Ministers,' 'General in charge of Guangdong and Guangxi,' 'Concurrent *Shangshu* in the Department of Officials,' 'Imperial Supervisor of the Palace Guards,' and 'Mentor of the Crown Prince.'" (202)

Such a lengthy title not only ridicules the vanity of the son in the joke, but also painstakingly reveals the cruelty and emptiness of political status, status as symbolic capital that has drawn many people to pursue an empty name for their entire life. Wu Ciyou's joke hence manifests his cynicism toward the vanity of political reputation, in contrast to his ambition expressed a moment before, hinting his later withdrawal from the political stage, in a disguised, leisurely way.

Similarly, Kangxi's joke manifests his status and concern as an emperor:

One family wanted to live in a better house, so they sold their land and all the stored grain. With borrowed money, they finally built a better house, only to find themselves starving without food. One friend came to visit them. He lifted his head and took a look at the house, commenting, "This is a good house, but short of two beams (*liang* 梁)." Upon being asked for explanation, he said: "one is without thinking (*si liang* 思量), the other is without pondering (*zhuo liang* 酌量)." (202)

Hardly a joke to make people laugh, it nonetheless reveals the emperor's identity-matching interest. The phonetic puns bring to light what is in the emperor's mind. On the one hand, it could mean the emperor's consciousness of the responsibility for managing a family (empire), to make a realistic plan, to balance resources, and to make ends meet; on the other hand, however, it could serve to warn Banbushan and Aobai, who should be aware of their own ability and potential enough not to risk shaking the throne. Or mostly likely, it could mean both. The house, or the throne, should match the person's destined status and identity. Not everybody is qualified to live with/in it. Without careful calculation and self-evaluation, even if one finally succeeds in building it, one cannot survive having it.

The poems, jokes, allusions, and puns, adeptly interlaced into one short chapter, at once conceal and reveal the characters' status and their interpersonal relationship. The indirection of these exchanges functions to dramatize the encounter so that Wu Ciyu and Banbushan can express distaste toward each other, and expose their personality to the emperor. The underlying revelation nonetheless manifests the narrator's omniscient perspective, to put the refined, the vulgar, the powerful, the powerless, the ambitious, and the disillusioned into one melting pot, to promote the character of the young emperor, and to foreshadow the storyline in the later chapters. Just as Wei Dongting's last joke suggests, the deaf person sees the blind person lighting the firecracker, which means both are blocked from the complete truth. In this episode, Wu Ciyu and Banbushan are like the deaf and the blind, while the emperor oversees the entire truth. Through the concise and ostensibly directionless portrayal of these people's performance, not only is the multifaceted traditional culture showcased in a broad scale, but the young emperor stands out as a superior hero with great talent, insight, and wisdom. It is around the emperor, who is the representative of the great

empire, that the diversified elements of the imperial culture are unified, fused, and consolidated in this textual space, exhibiting the centralizing force for this four-knurl-lotus root-like novel.

Among the three novels, *Emperor Yongzheng* was regarded as the most successful one for its design of plots, various literary devices, and the keen observation of political struggles. Literary critic Ding Linyi commented: “with its rare thoughtful insights and artistic creativity, it is the historical novel most worth reading since the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. It wouldn’t be exaggerating to say it is a superb work one can only expect every fifty or even one hundred years.”³⁰⁸

True or not, the comment in effect implies that the novel satisfies, even surpasses, the reader’s expectation for a literary reconstruction of history. It challenges the reader’s imagination of a controversial emperor, and most of all, reifies the popular imagination of a prosperous empire, the empire that is glossed with a glorified image from outside after Kangxi’s reign yet full of corruption, potential crisis, and political turmoil inside.

Unlike the conventional image of Emperor Yongzheng as severe, cruel, insecure, intolerant of the existence of competitive siblings, and the promoter of the “word prison” to trap intelligent scholars, Yongzheng in Eryuehe’s novel appears first of all as a reformer and the guarantor of the people’s interests. It not only legitimizes his rule but also puts him among the great emperors in history. As the theme song of the adapted TV series suggests, “it is said that whoever gains the heart of the people will govern all under Heaven, let’s see who will rule the empire,” Yongzheng’s heroic image is first of all gained from the notion of “Minxin-Tianxia.” Not only is his throne justified by his devotion to the well being of the common people and the empire, but

³⁰⁸ Ding Linyi, *Beijing qingnian bao* (Beijing youth), March 19, 1996. Reprinted in Feng Xingge et al, eds. *Jujiao “huangdi zuojia” Eryuehe* (Focus on the “emperor writer” Eryuehe) (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2003), 221.

his mercilessness toward the privileged officials and nobles becomes necessary and essential. Presented as the “cold-faced emperor,” Yongzheng dares to challenge the age-old and deeply-ingrained bureaucratic corruption, working diligently to make sure that the people suffering from natural disasters are well cared for, the funds loaned to the officials returned to the state treasury, and the foundation of the empire further strengthened. This ironfisted image undoubtedly encounters discontent from his officials, yet ironically helps to underpin the prosperous reign for the next emperor Qianlong, and most positively, answers to the popular desire to eliminate corruption in contemporary society.³⁰⁹

The novel comprises three volumes, in all of which the theme “Minxin-Tianxia” (people’s heart—All under Heaven) is implicit. It is conveyed not only from the emperor’s words, but also through the construction of different spaces. As the aforementioned temple scenario suggests, the space of the temple provides multiple cultural cues, elements, and aspects to intertwine different characters together, to make explicit their relative relationship. Yet time—the different temporalities inscribed in the objects within the temple, such as the Ming Emperor’s writing, the age-old cauldron, the imagery of carp springing out of the pool, is rendered timeless, ahistorical, universal. The assemblage of the cultural elements, layer by layer accumulated through time, only serves to construct an empirical space in which the tensions among the characters are played out. Indeed, Eryuehe is good at creating different social spaces, unfolding the relationship among characters, while time is differentiated into the transcendent, imperial moral time and the empirical, spatialized time.

³⁰⁹ Zhu Ying, “*Yongzheng wangchao* he meiguo huangjin shidian de dianshiju” (Chinese translation of the article in English: The Yongzheng Dynasty and the Revisionist Qing Drama: Chinese Primetime Television’s Historical Turn) in *Zhongmei dianshiju bijiao yanjiu* (Comparative Research on Television Drama between China and America), 47.

In the first volume *Jiu wang duo di* (Nine princes struggle for the throne), the first ten chapters already lay out the most important characters for the whole novel and describe all the spaces that annotate the relationship among the characters: the beautiful natural and historical sites that usually arouse historical consciousness associated with unemployed scholars; the commercial market places that circulate rumors, gossip among elites and common people; the local governmental space associated with corrupt local officials; the disastrous countryside space associated with starving peasants and heartless villains; the imperial palace associated with the anxious emperor; and the wealthy residential neighborhoods in Beijing associated with powerful officials in the capital city.³¹⁰ The novel allows the protagonist, prince Yinzhen (the future emperor Yongzheng) to transgress all these spaces, placing him among all kinds of people to discover the social network built by different levels of officials. The brief introduction of the talented yet unfortunate scholar Wu Sidao, and the shrewd boys Gou Er and Kan Er from the labor market, foreshadows the crucial role they are going to play in helping the prince to gain the throne, and meanwhile implies the prince's identification with the people.

Indeed, space is privileged over time so much so that the entire life of the emperor is consumed by the narrative of spaces and the contradictions among them. Time nonetheless manifests itself as a double structure: empirical time, or timing, associated with practical situations; and transcendent time, which is the universal moral time ingrained in the imperial thinking, and which determines the transfer of the throne and the fate of the individuals. However, unlike Ling Li's novels that are endowed with a presaging quality pointing to the developmental future, also unlike the modern "empty, homogeneous time" in Walter Benjamin's characterization, the two

³¹⁰ Eryuehe, *Yongzheng huangdi—jiu wang duo di* (Emperor Yongzheng—Nine princes struggle for the throne) (Taipei: Babilun chubanshe, 1999), Vol 1.

features of time in Eryuehe's novels exhibit a tense relationship with each other. While empirical time requires chance and strategy to manipulate timing to deal with uncertainty, transcendent time has a streak of timeless, all-encompassing flavor with a fated characteristic, as if everything is foreordained, and there is no alternative possibility.

Eryuehe believes that every dynasty has its own fatalistic destiny, and no one single emperor could change the fate of the empire, which explains the cyclical development of Chinese history.³¹¹ The *shi-trend* of the empire could be molded by human beings, yet collectively rather than individually. A heroic individual might discursively change his empirical situation in a microcosmic way to follow the historical trend, but he could not change the macrocosmic trend itself. Such an understanding reflects the deep-rooted "imperial-time regime." In light of this understanding, Prince Yinzhen is destined to be the next emperor among Kangxi's numerous promising sons from the logic of the empire—"Minxin-Tianxia," while Wu Sidao and other subordinates are just helping to cope with his empirical situation (形势). By the same token, the talented scholarly advisors cannot escape their fate as an imperial instrument destined to be alienated in the future. Their special positioning determines the double-edged relationship with the emperor: the emperor needs them in some circumstances, yet not always. Once they accomplish their mission for the emperor, either they will become too close to be trustworthy or so powerful as to be threatening. In that sense, the scholarly advisors Wu Ciyou (for Kangxi) and Wu Sidao (For Yongzheng) have to refuse the favorable positions the emperors offer them at the peak of their careers, not only because they desire to live a reclusive life, but also because that is the best destiny for them. Ambitious and insightful as they are in helping the unfledged emperor and prince, they undoubtedly crave to accomplish more

³¹¹ Feng Xingge, et al, eds. *Jujiao "huangdi zuojia" Eryuehe*. 265.

in their lifetime, yet they are also far-sighted enough to tell that withdrawal early is better than staying, for they are very much aware that their talent, knowledge, and close relationship with the emperors will sooner or later get them into trouble, just as past examples in history demonstrate and as the old saying “the moon starts to wane once it is full” describes.

In this regard, there are two conflicting views that simultaneously face the characters in the novel—uncertainty and fatalism. Insofar as the empirical situation is complicated and the future is not perceptible, the characters have to work in every way to actualize their best potential. On the other hand, their innate characters or behavior will decisively lead to their pre-determined destiny that may or may not be what they have dreamed of. In other words, uncertainty is the engine for the individuals to strive for their fate, to enhance the empirical force to achieve the inevitable destiny, and meanwhile, for the novel to intensify the contradictions and push the storyline forward.

In fact, indeterminacy to some extent organizes the entire novel to suggest all kinds of possibilities, and makes enough room for the characters to discover their potential and change their situation. For instance, in the first volume *Jiu wang duo di*, more than ten adult princes are involved in the struggle for the throne. Among them the most influential ones, including the existing crown prince, the first prince, and the eighth prince, all consciously devote themselves to activities like expanding their power group, pleasing the emperor, and circumscribing each other’s power, in order to strengthen their individual position to become the imperial heir. The protagonist, the seemingly hard-working, unambitious fourth prince Yinzhen, the future emperor Yongzheng, also unfailingly manifests his own aspiration, which is articulated by his advisor Wu Sidao. With Wu’s insightful analysis of the situation, effective speculation regarding the emperor’s intentions, and efficient manipulation of timing, Yinzhen’s innate nature of diligence, justness, benevolence toward the people, and cold-faced

competence is brought to the full attention of the emperor. However, after the crown prince is deposed, the next candidate turns out to be a mystery. Instead of naming a crown prince while all the princes still underhandedly struggle for the crown, the emperor for many years decides to keep his decision a secret. He composes a rescript in which the next emperor's name is stated and hides it in the palace. That means, even though their fate has been pre-determined, for the princes, the situation is still indeterminate, and they more than ever expose their "inappropriate" ambition, which further intensifies the contradiction among them and renders the textual struggle a tense and exciting one. However, the surface indeterminacy merely serves to distinguish Yinzhen from other, unqualified princes, boost the force for his legitimacy, and finally lead to his unavoidable destiny—to be the next emperor.

Fate plays a crucial role in *Emperor Yongzheng*. Although fate determines that the empire be unified, no individual could really control their own fate, since everybody is actively or passively engulfed in the huge wheel of time, of empire. Setting aside the unfair fate falling upon the common people, like the undeserved death of innocent Kan Er, the tragicomic romance between emperor Yongzheng and his unknown daughter Qiao Yindi best demonstrates this fatalistic view, which casts an ironic and poignant shadow on the heroic image of the emperor. Known for his simple and abstinent lifestyle among the luxurious nobles, Prince Yinzhen could be seen as one of the few who do not indulge in fulfilling physical desire. However, fatefully he falls in love with a Han girl of lowly origin during one of his trips to inspect the flood of the Huanghe River. Rescued by the girl Xiao Fu (Happiness), he has an affair with her during his stay in her home. Unable (or unwilling) to marry her on account of her lowly status, he secretly witnesses Xiao Fu's clan punish her severely for her adultery. Convinced that the pregnant Xiao Fu has been burned to death, he is overwhelmed by guilt and passion. So later when the emperor, the former

prince, meets Qiao Yindi, the favorite consort of his younger brother prince Yunti, he cannot help but notice that Yindi looks exactly like the dead Xiao Fu. With his reputation and the brother's hatred at stake, he nonetheless makes Yindi come to the imperial palace to accompany him. While Yindi's attitude toward him gradually changes from hostility to admiration, they finally become a loving couple and Yindi is promoted as the imperial concubine. However the reality is so cruel that Yindi turns out to be his daughter by Xiao Fu, which ultimately leads to Yindi's suicide and his own death from an overdose of drugs.

This agonizing story implies less criticism toward the feudal constraint on individuals than demonstration of the voluntary notion of "retribution." If the romance of Kangxi and Icy Moon in Ling Li's novel manifests an individual's incapacity to fight against a much more powerful social convention in need of elimination, as in the literature of May Fourth period which aims to criticize feudalism and seek freedom, Yongzheng's romance with Xiao Fu and Yindi rather exhibits the unavoidable shortcomings of the individual facing a paradoxical choice. It is not clear why Xiao Fu has to die (it suggests that the girl who was burned to death is her twin sister Xiao Lu), nor is it convincing that Prince Yinzhen cannot take Xiao Fu away with him since he can freely buy any servants and maids in the market. Perhaps, it is to save his image as a virtuous prince that Xiao Fu becomes his sacrifice. It is guilt, rather than desire, that ignites his passion for Yindi to make up for his mistake in his youth, which unfortunately develops into an even tighter loop strangling both of them. A cool, capable, and justifiably benevolent emperor is therefore belittled by his own character and personal choice.

Indeed, unlike the emperors in Ling Li's novels who are idealized, perfected, and are relatively lacking any depth of personality, the emperors in Eryuehe's novels appear to be more complex, sophisticated, and a composite of a force for both good

and ill. They not only have the legitimacy to rule by birthright (the imperial bloodline), but also possess charisma, wisdom, and strategy to secure their image and their rule, even at the cost of love and friendship.

In fact, the insecurity of the throne plays a critical role in the growth of the emperors. The threat either comes from equally legitimate brothers, or from powerful officials/generals who have military ability, or from the common people who can initiate peasant rebellions to overthrow the throne. Insecurity is the built-in crisis that reminds the emperor to calculate, to balance, even to sacrifice, in order to fit in his position and secure his identity. As Yongzheng utters his concern in front of his invincible, competing brothers upon Kangxi's death, insecurity in effect haunts every emperor in history:

Zhu Yuanzhang once said, the barbarian's rule in China has never lasted for a hundred years since ancient times. Thinking back to the time from the Five Hu's [ethnic minorities] disturbing China till the Yuan dynasty, this has proved true. We Manchu have only less than one million people. To rule China, if we are not alert, careful, and concerned day and night as if walking on thin ice, will be like tossing a handful of spices into Lake Taihu—there is no way to make a spicy soup! How difficult our task is! Even though we are trying to be vigilant enough, diligently working from early morning to late night, there are still many mistakes that are hard to correct! In my view, Shengzu [Kangxi] really worked his heart out for all under Heaven, for ruling the Chinese empire so much so that he succumbed to exhaustion!

So it is a tough job to be an emperor, and it is even tougher for one of our Manchu to be an emperor! ³¹²

He then lists all the virtues his brothers have and insincerely offers to abdicate the throne to whoever desires it. Of course, such a speech is designed to disguise his ambition and seek recognition of his authority from his competitive brothers, yet it

³¹² Eryuehe, *Yongzheng huangdi—jiu wang duo di* (vol.2) (Emperor Yongzheng—Nine princes struggle for throne), Vol 2, 333.

also articulates the real anxiety of the emperor originating from both outside and inside the court.

The motivation to surpass the past great emperors and the delicate practical situation force the emperor both to enlarge and belittle himself in front of his blueprint of the great empire. In Eryuehe's novels, what distinguishes the great emperor (Kangxi) from other people is his unprecedented ambition to build an unparalleled empire and the supreme ability to deal with the unbearable pressure, which requires that the emperor must have superhuman strength and wisdom, and at the same time, be aware of his insecure situation within the empire and in history.

Among the three emperors, Kangxi is regarded as the greatest one. The *Great Emperor Kangxi* is designed to accentuate the "greatness" of Kangxi. "Yao Xueyin criticized me for using the word 'great,'" Eryuehe wrote in his correspondence, "yet my central gist is to describe his 'greatness.'"³¹³ In his Preface to the novel, Eryuehe lists various great accomplishment of Kangxi, concluding that the emperor's enormous martial and civil achievements could be compared with those of Tang Taizong and Song Taizu, which makes him one of the greatest emperors in one thousand years.³¹⁴ Two layers of meanings could be elicited from Eryuehe's writing: one, the emperor is great; two, Kangxi's "greatness" is determined and conditioned by the great empire only through which his legitimacy is secured and his authority acknowledged.

The dialectical relationship between the great emperor as a hero and the empire that defines him and his greatness manifests the thematic significance in both Eryuehe and Ling Li's novels. They both create the images of the successful emperors in the early Qing Dynasty, rearticulating the theme of "minxin-Tianxia." Yet they diverge in

³¹³ Ibid. 240.

³¹⁴ Eryuehe, *Eryuehe zuopin zixuanji* (The self collection of Eryuehe's works) (Zhengzhou: Henan wenyi chubanshe, 1999), 220.

the representation of time. While Ling Li inherits more of the modern revolutionary legacy and projects an ideal image of future empire in her novels, Eryuehe takes the traditional values for granted and presents an all-encompassing, timeless image of the empire. Time for Ling Li is spiral and developmental; for Eryuehe it is differential—both transcendent and empirical.

The converged image of the empire and differentiated presentation of time is at once symptomatic of, and paradigmatic of, the post-revolutionary cultural arena. The multi-layered representation of the same historical image could also be seen in the three movies about the first emperor Qin Shihuang, which leaves the tension among different discourses open awaiting a future resolution.

Meanwhile, the voluminous TV series expand the empire narrative to a broader scale. Most of Ling Li's and Eryuehe's novels have been adapted into television dramas, participating in a larger trend of visualizing empire. Yet in the television dramas, the heroic image of the emperors appears to be more unified and harmonious, while the tensions among the characters and discourses are secretly resolved not only in language, but also in image. Insofar as the TV series has greater representational capacity than the films, and is more visually appealing than the novels, it possesses a comparative advantage in representing the *idea* of empire and projecting the *image* of harmony and abundance.

In the next section, I will direct attention to the TV series on the imperial history. Besides the thematic significance, the specificity of the media will be brought to the fore, to bring to light the centralizing and consolidating function of the empire representation in contemporary China.

CHAPTER 6

Empire plus Family: the Performative Space on the Television Screen

Europeans suffered from a schizophrenia of the soul, oscillating forever unhappily between the heavenly host on the one side and the ‘atoms and the void’ on the other; while the Chinese, wise before their time, worked out an organic theory of the universe which included nature and man, church and state, and all things past, present, and to come.

----Joseph Needham *Science and China's Influence on the world*

Television dramas: state propaganda?

In her thought-provoking work on contemporary Chinese television,³¹⁵ Ying Zhu made an extensive analysis of the interplay between state and society. She pointed out that, although China's media industry has been undergoing the processes of decentralization, marketization, and commercialization since the 1980s, the change of economic structure has not reduced the state's regulatory power in television production. On the contrary, decentralization and deregulation have always been accompanied with consolidation in content control and integration in administration, production, and delivery. A combination of legal and administrative means has mostly functioned to “maximize state control over television drama production from conception to broadcast.”³¹⁶ In this sense, the booming historical dramas, specifically the “emperor series,” at the turn of the twenty first century reflect the ideological shift—in Zhu's characterization, the demonstration of Neo-authoritarianism—in the central government advocated by the New Left intellectuals, who support a strong centralized state. Moreover, in the global context, the propagation of the serial dramas

³¹⁵ Ying Zhu, *Television in Post-Reform China: Serial Dramas, Confucian Leadership and the Global Television Market* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008).

³¹⁶ Ibid. 11.

throughout the pan-Chinese area and the diaspora creates a cultural-linguistic market comparable to those of the English- and Spanish-speaking worlds.³¹⁷

Zhu's analysis, inspiring as it is, invites critical investigation. The first query arises from the linguistic-comparative approach. Even though the framework of "cultural-linguistic market" evokes a fresh perspective to look at Chinese television production and distribution, the television dramas, especially the historical ones, attract the Chinese-speaking audience in a centripetal rather than a centrifugal way. In other words, while the multi-centered or non-centered English or Spanish television programs blur the national boundaries when they circulate among the audience, the Chinese television dramas, on the contrary, reassert the Chinese center yet expand the national boundary by promoting and consolidating traditional values. Moreover, the distribution of television dramas on TV mostly relies on the advertisers whose interest resides only in their domestic market share. In both senses, television in China is still more of a domestic than a global phenomenon, which is perhaps where the difference between television and film lies.

There has been much discussion of the differences between film and television. Generally, whereas film embraces the broader social space, especially in recent years, the global space, television series are mainly devoted to portraying a familial space for the domestic market. Film is regarded as the "factory of dreams" which could be experimental and surreal, whereas the television series is dedicated to portraying daily empirical experience. Film mainly aims to construct visual and psychological stimulation, whereas the television series focuses on creating characters and dialogues in a more detailed way. Where film could be full of ideological contradictions and

³¹⁷ Ibid. 3-4.

cultural differences, the television series is primarily concerned with the consolidation of mainstream morals and ethics.³¹⁸

In light of these media-specific comparisons, especially of ideological orientations, television offers a more convergent political view than film. This leads to the second query about Zhu's observation. While Zhu is convincing in situating the TV dramas in the intellectual debate concerning the course of China's modernization,³¹⁹ the direct connection she makes between state policy and the seemingly marginal New Left intellectuals appears to be confusing and too simplistic. Setting aside the elusive label of the "New Left," since it is as unclear who really belongs to this group as it is how much they really agree with each other on certain political views within the group, her observation fails to single out the integrating effect of the historical dramas and the convergence of the intellectual vision of a national imagination. According to Zhu, it seems that the regimes of Jiang Zemin and then Hu Jintao have been deeply influenced by the New Left intellectuals, presumably the alleged (Neo)Marxists who represent the interests of "the People," and ironically promote Confucian values through historical TV serial dramas. On the surface, the direct connection between the New Left intellectuals and the Confucian leadership Zhu makes is confusing at best, misleading at worst. However, contrary to the seemingly contradictory linkage, Zhu's analysis nevertheless indicates the underlying convergence among the intellectuals, be they New Leftists, Nativists, as some characterize those who promote traditional values, or liberals. In other words, unlike film, which could demonstrate multiple, controversial, even extremely oppositional perspectives, television drama nonetheless blurs the boundaries of intellectual visions and provides a performative platform for a convergence of national imaginations. It is

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ying Zhu, *Television in Post-Reform China: Serial Dramas, Confucian Leadership and the Global Television Market*, 3-4.

not that the state adopted the New Leftist view and superimposed it on the production and distribution of television dramas; rather, television dramas manifest the active negotiations between political and economic powers, and the confluence of intellectual visions of China's future, which is projected onto China's imperial past. In fact, I would suggest that the success of historical dramas demonstrates the age-old historical way of thinking, rather than the merely "Confucian" one, that is still working through the Chinese elites and ordinary audience to shape their view of China's past as well as its future. It is the imperial-time regime—normalization of unification and moralization of time—that helps harmonize and consolidate the social discrepancies in a transitory historical moment.

In this chapter, instead of concentrating attention on the intellectual debate reflected in the television productions, I would rather take these historical TV series as texts mirroring social relations. Focusing on the "emperor series" in general, and the TV series *Hanwu da di* (the great Emperor Wu of the Han) in particular, I intend to show that such family-centered historical TV series appear as a stabilizing and consolidating force resulting from negotiations among multiple social powers in contemporary China. At the same time, their prominence manifests the persistent imperial-time regime becoming more and more visible in a global context. Textual analysis reveals a dialectic between eternal contradiction and ultimate harmony that spills over the textual frame, and calls for a harmonious society embracing discrepancies and welcoming difference.

Historical television series: the "field" of negotiation

The favorable portrayal of the past emperors, especially the Qing emperors, started from the late 1990s, yet it gained popularity immediately so as to dominate the television screen at the turn of the new century. Many historical novels, including

those by the popular authors Ling Li and Eryuehe, have been adapted into TV series to shower the audience with overwhelmingly splendid images and convoluted stories. However, compared to the novels, not only does the TV series appeal to a broader audience regardless of their educational background, but the visual language also more directly reifies the power and wealth of the empire, and thus more efficiently shapes the national imagination in terms of abundance and harmony.

Indeed, as the leading family-centered narrative art form,³²⁰ the television series targets the widest possible audience regardless of their age or social background, inevitably proving to be the most powerful medium to shape the public mentality. According to *China TV Drama Report 2003-2004*, among all the TV programs, the biggest shortage (5.8%) was in the supply of TV series in 2002, suggesting that there was more demand for TV series than for other programs, even though TV series already occupied 27% of all broadcasting, more than any other single category among the programs.³²¹ The same source also reported that in 2002, historical dramas, or costume dramas, consisted of 30.3% of the entire TV series supply, and demonstrated a greater gap in demand than other types of series.³²² In other words, even though the modern dramas, including romances, urban life, crime investigations, sitcoms, et cetera, dominated the screen in quantity, they as a whole appeared to exceed audience demand, whereas the supply of historical series could not meet the demand. Moreover, the TV series broadcast by CCTV (China Central Television) proved to be more welcomed and competitive among the educated audience. That means, people with higher education tended to watch those TV series produced by CCTV, the most

³²⁰ Yin Hong and Yang Daihui, “Zhongguo dianshiju yishu chuantong” (The artistic tradition of Chinese television series), in Zhu Ying and Qu Chunjing, eds. *Zhongmei dianshiju bijiao yanjiu* (Comparative Research on Chinese and American Television Drama) (Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian shudian, 2005), 343.

³²¹ *Zhongguo dianshiju shichang baogao 2003-2004* (China TV drama report 2003-2004) (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2004), 44.

³²² I believe that historical dramas occupied a larger proportion of TV series broadcasting in the late 1990s and 2000 or 2001. However, the statistical source is not available.

politically guarded and ideologically centralizing TV station in China. In light of this information, the structure of television production and consumption, as well as audience preference and their relationship with the CCTV, manifested a somewhat different picture of Chinese television from the global image of this media. To put it in another way, inasmuch as the TV series—the dramatic representational art that requires extended devotion and patience from the audience—demonstrates the undiminished attraction of television, and CCTV plays a predominantly leading role in consolidating an audience, Chinese television appears to be more of a totalizing force in favor of social stability and ethical affirmation.

In the field of television criticism, western scholars usually focus on the ethical or ideological effect of television on society, specifically, timely news production rather than dramatic representation. As the dominant mass medium in post-industrial society, television has manifested itself as a “subversive medium,” as asserted by Alvin Toffler, in that it offers an unprecedented channel to propagate information that challenges political authority. Everywhere in the contemporary world, Toffler suggests, people are exploiting this medium to question, and sometimes to overthrow, the political power of the state.³²³ Such a statement finds agreement in Habermas’s observation on the political havoc in Eastern Europe, that television not only recorded the historical events in the former socialist Germany, Romania, and Czechoslovakia, but the havoc itself was also promoted and completed by means of television broadcasting. Television made omnipresent the political demonstrations and protests that were otherwise absent outside of streets and political centers, and thus exhibited revolutionary force toward authoritarian political machines.³²⁴

³²³ Alvin Toffler, *Powershift: Knowledge, Wealth, and Violence at the Edge of the 21st Century* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 348.

³²⁴ Jurgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence, (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1991).

Besides its subversive potential in the political arena, television is also seen as the seditious force in destroying traditional morals and values, as it tends to exaggerate sex, violence, chaos, and disaster, seek visual stimulation that is far from social reality, and normalize, even promote, material satisfaction rather than spiritual pursuit that leads to decadence and hedonism. As James Twitchell observes, American TV has become “a medium whose input is so profound and so resolutely banal that it has almost single-handedly removed vulgarity from modern culture by making it the norm.”³²⁵ “The result is a mass culture, driven by profiteers who exploit the hunger of vulgarity, pornography, and even barbarism. Such supremacy of decadence and hedonism in a culture cannot help but have a demoralizing effect on the values of society, undermining and eroding once more deeply felt beliefs.”³²⁶

In a word, from the ethical or ideological perspective, critical social thinkers have realized the powerful force intrinsic in television, that it has a “subversive” tendency which could be used in both positive or negative ways, that it could produce a “public sphere” to propagate the democratic message, or that it could be manipulated by one single power to become the voice of control. The term “public sphere” comes from Jürgen Habermas, indicating the public space between state power and the society. In an ideal sense, public sphere is an autonomous area in which citizens could freely express their opinions that are independent of both state power and market control. Mass media, to be sure, operate in the public sphere. However, Habermas also observes that the democratic character of the public sphere, which has been conducive to the growth of the bourgeois class following feudal society, has lost its strength in the capitalist world as capital has deprived this sphere of freedom. In other words, the

³²⁵ James B. Twitchell, *Carnival Culture—the Trashing of Taste in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

³²⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Out of control: global turmoil on the eve of the twenty-first century* (New York: Arobert Stewart Book, 1993), 112.

structural shift of the public sphere has submitted this formerly revolutionary space to the hegemony of capital.³²⁷ Such an argument rationalizes the function of the public sphere, and hence the mass media, in the contemporary world. It shifts the attention from the after effect of the media, the consumption of the images, to the structure of the media and the production of the images. The causative relation between capital and the change of public sphere suggests that it is the pursuit of profit, or the regulation of the market, that determines the commercialization, vulgarization, and homogenization of the television programs.

Yet, on the other hand, Habermas's emphasis on capital as the foremost reason controlling mass media seems to be exaggerated or only partially valid. Since political power, age-old cultural heritage, and majority public taste still play a role in the production of television images, capital could not be the sole factor to determine television. In this sense, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of "the field" seems to be beneficial to serve our purpose. "The field" is a core concept in Bourdieu's sociological theory. For Bourdieu, society could be divided into multiple yet interrelated fields, among which different forces interact, compete, and negotiate with each other to gain legitimacy or power. Individuals, or a group of individuals, are "agents" with various forms of capital, including cultural, symbolic capital, to operate within or between the fields.³²⁸ Therefore, any field could be a space where multiple forms of capital are involved in following different game rules. For instance, television as a medium constitutes a field where news production, which is most likely controlled by political or economic capital, science and art exchange, which is relatively independent of politics and economy, and commercial advertisement, which strictly follows the rule

³²⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

³²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited and introduced by John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 29.

of the market, all could find a place in it.³²⁹ Even though the success of the media itself is by and large determined by the audience ratings, and art work cannot avoid the fate of being commercialized, economic capital is far from the only “actor” in this “field.”

In this light, television in China is not only not solely the product of capital, but is still on the way to achieving the balance and harmony among different forms of capital. As Li Haibo points out, television in China today is experiencing an on-going negotiation between political and economic powers. Although the reform of television is relatively successful in the process of privatization and marketization, legal, political regulations still weigh heavily on it.³³⁰ On the other hand, the competition among different levels of TV stations determines that the audience is the ultimate judge of the programs. “The invisible hand” of the market has involved different “agents” in “the field” of television. The audience, especially the educated audience, participates in both producing and consuming high quality TV series that satisfy social, educational, and entertainment functions. The encounter and compromise between different forms of “capital,” especially between monetary capital and politics, suggests that TV productions have to be politically mainstream, market-oriented, and conducive to the security and stability of society.

In this sense, the propagation of historical dramas not only projects an image of abundance to fulfill the popular desire for prosperity and stability, but also helps mold the national imagination into a vision of China as a glorious empire promoted by the government in a collective, communal way. The plentiful supply and the insatiable demand demonstrate this mutual nourishment for the flourishing of historical dramas from both top-down and bottom-up directions. It seems that the

³²⁹ Bourdieu, *On Television* (New York : The New Press, 1998).

³³⁰ Liu Haibo, “*Zhengzhi yu ziben de boyi*” (The game-play between politics and capital), in Qu Chunjing and Zhu Ying, eds. *Zhongmei dianshiju bijiao yanjiu*, 455-70.

production and consumption of historical TV series are altogether molding a new *shi*-trend for China's self-imaging and self-identification, a *shi*-trend with a direction that neither state politics nor private capital can totally determine. On the contrary, each party is a distinguished "agent," its role defined by this trend and required to adjust its position in this trend.

Meanwhile, the lengthy series with its dramatic suspense was able to draw the audience out together, to identify, to discuss, to predict, and to express the emotional excess for what should or should not have happened in history, as well as what should be watched for in the present. The discussion of the TV series, in a sense, helped create a communal space, in the family, even in the working place, to fuse a community with a shared history. The sizeable production and promotion of historical dramas, hence, exhibited the most centralizing and consolidating effect in the contemporary cultural landscape. For instance, many of the "emperor series," including the serious representations of Qin Shihuang (*Qin Shihuang*), Han Wudi (*Hanwu da di* and *Da Han tianzi*), Tang Taizong (*Zhenguan changge*), Ming Taizu (*Zhu Yuanzhang*), Qing Kangxi (*Kangxi wangchao*), Qing Yongzheng (*Yongzheng wangchao*), et cetera, were initiated and first broadcast in primetime on Channel One of CCTV, attracting first of all the educated audience and cultural elite. Not only did the bombarding of "empire representation" engender intense reaction, manifested by means of critical reviews, scholarly discussion, and anonymous debate in newspapers, journals, and internet blogs, but also the sales of DVD and VCD copies greatly extended the discussion in both temporal and spatial senses. Traditional values such as "Minxin-Tianxia," loyalty, filial piety, and the imperial legacy articulated in these dramas therefore appeared at the peak of national visibility. The audience varied, from Party leaders, government officials, and university professors, to company employees and ordinary, retired people, but they were all exposed to the same imperial space,

enfolded in the conventional values and social ideals, both passively and actively trying to position China and oneself in the contemporary world.

One major characteristic of the TV series, in comparison to the novels, is that the visual language tends to idealize the imperial image, hence even further glorify the Chinese empire. As critics pointed out, the image of the emperors on the television screen appeared to be more heroic and loftier than the already glorified one in the novels.³³¹ For instance, the TV series *Yongzheng wangchao* (The reign of Yongzheng) creates an almost flawless, perfect image of Emperor Yongzheng, which diverges from that in Eryuehe's original novel, one that has been criticized for its elevation of the emperor's image.³³² Director Hu Mei defended this adaptation in terms of the specificity of the medium, admitting that the TV series deliberately aimed to construct a heroic icon of the emperor, since the television screen needed heroes.³³³

Moreover, the television representation also tends to idealize the relationship between the emperor and his subordinates, perpetuating a hierarchical relationship in a more harmonious, egalitarian, and sentimentalized way. For instance, in the TV series *Kangxi wangchao* (The reign of Kangxi), the last meeting between the emperor and the Han official Zhou Peigong turns out to be an exaggerated, moving, and emotionally charged scene to eliminate all the discontent between them. Not only does Zhou, on his deathbed, present the emperor the most comprehensive map of China, one that he has spent ten years in the deserted northeast to draw, reminding the emperor of unification and the future strategy, but the emperor is also so moved by Zhou's loyalty and far-sightedness that he stays up all night to accompany Zhou's

³³¹ Refer to Ma Zhenfang, *Zai lishi yu xugou zhijian* (Between history and the fictitious) (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006), 276. Tang Zhesheng, *Zhongguo dangdai tongsu xiaoshuo shilun* (The history of the contemporary popular fiction) (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007), 317.

³³² Ibid. Also refer to Feng Xingge et al, eds. *Jujiao "huangdi zuojia" Eryuehe* (Focus on the "emperor writer" Eryuehe) (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2003), 153.

³³³ Shan Wenhe, "Liangge Yongzheng na ge geng zhenshi?" (Which Yongzheng is more realistic?) in Feng Xingge et al, eds. *Jujiao "huangdi zuojia" Eryuehe* (Focus on the emperor writer" Eryuehe) (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2003), 154.

spirit after his death. The touching display of both people's emotions wipes away all the previous discord between them, as if the emperor has never treated Zhou unfairly and Zhou has never complained about his own fate. The scene, hence, transcends the ethnic, political contradictions, so much so that both the emperor and Zhou's images become more heroic. The map signifies unification, the blueprint for the future empire, which renders Zhou's image larger than life; on the other side, the unusual emotional display by the emperor manifests the interdependent relationship between them, reducing the emperor to a functionary position in building a great empire. This idealized portrayal diverges both from the original novel and the historical account,³³⁴ generating great dramatic effect in presenting a harmonious relationship under the glory of the empire.

In this regard, instead of faithfully recovering a historical empire centered on the emperor with absolute power, the television series displays qualities that are both centralizing and hierarchical, yet also egalitarian to project the image of empire. It is hard to tell what the real history would look like; only an imagined one seems to be possible and reasonable due to an imperial ideal—an ideal that has inspired generations of Chinese intellectuals for the realization of the real “grand unity,” one that not only enfolds the present, but also envelops the past, and embraces the future.

Family plus Empire: the energy flow scheme

In terms of narrative strategy, one major feature of the historical television dramas is that they are all centered on familial space, partly because of the specificity of the media as an art targeted at home audiences, partly due to the traditional

³³⁴ Meng Zhuo, *Liu da lishiju pipan* (The Critique of Six Historical Dramas) (Beijing: Zhongguo gongren chubanshe, 2005), 191-4. Historically, this most comprehensive and accurate map was not drawn by Zhou Peigong, but was a project assigned by the emperor Kangxi himself and conducted by a French missionary Bai Jin—Joachim Bouvet.

homology between the family and the empire. The imperial family is presented as the microcosm of the empire on the television screen, showing the most powerful people being troubled about family affairs comparable to those of the ordinary family yet more complicated in scope and larger in scale. Meanwhile, the image of the empire in terms of wealth and power is consumed in an intimate, egalitarian, familial setting. “Power fetish,” a term used by the cautious critics to criticize the mesmerizing ideological effect of the historical dramas,³³⁵ manifests the negative function of such a glorifying portrayal. Yet on the other hand, the splendid image of the imperial family nevertheless projects a sense of all-encompassing unity, abundance, and the ultimate harmony achieved after balancing different interests among the family members and the empire.

In the “emperor series,” in most cases, the emperor is situated in the complicated network of imperial family members, court officials related to the emperor with nepotism, powerful generals who can both protect and threaten the throne, and the other subordinates associated with different power groups. Rather than being an independent, absolute despot on top of the social strata, the emperor is the loneliest man, who has to be sober, wise, capable of balancing the power groups, and good at making use of the different forces to the advantage of his own rule and the growth of the empire. Social values, rituals, and family ethics are all double-edged swords to be both the constraints on and the forces for the emperor. To secure his position, the emperor has to subject himself to the larger imperial rhetoric “Tianxia”; to be successful and great, he is forced to manipulate different forces and consolidate them into positive energy for the prosperity of the empire.

³³⁵ Zhang Dexiang, “Lishi tici dianshiju siti” (Four topics on historical television series), in *Zhongmei dianshiju bijiao yanjiu*, 486-502. Also see Tang Zhesheng, *Zhongguo dangdai tongsu xiaoshuo shilu*, 331.

Indeed, what the emperor has to do is to *position* himself within the network of family plus empire, empirically in the family and transcendently in the empire. The so-called “tactic of the emperor” (*diwang zhishu* 帝王之术) or the “strategy of contingency” (*quanbian zhishu* 权变之术), as the critics characterize it, is no more than the manipulation of the different energies to construct the positive *shi*-force, and most of all, the reconciliation of the competing powers to strengthen the centrality of the emperor’s authority. The familial space, in this sense, becomes the foundational node for the interaction of forces, in which the emperor is both surrounded and elevated, both being inside and outside—within the family as a member of it, outside it as a transcendent emperor. The tension between the family and the empire, hence, resides in the emperor’s double identity, which could either fail him as an emperor if he cannot balance the doubleness or fulfill him if he could master the flow of different political forces around him. The great emperors, such as Emperor Wu of the Han or Emperor Kangxi of the Qing, are such masters of artistically dealing with this double identity and bringing the contradictory forces into the fullest harmony.

However, the compromise and reconciliation of forces is not so much the Confucian “middle way” as the continuous transformation of energies through the emperor’s manipulation. In other words, the forces are far from fixed in terms of their function of being constructive or destructive to the emperor’s rule or the strength of the empire; rather, they are relative and exchangeable. They are in the constant flux of change between imbalance and equilibrium. Just as the *Book of Changes* describes, *yin* and *yang*, or the positive and the negative energies, are interchangeable while the optimal state is their being in changing equilibrium. Whereas at one point one force is positive for the empire, it may become negative later; whereas in one circumstance the forces are balanced under the emperor’s control, in another circumstance they may turn out to be imbalanced to threaten the emperor’s rule. To bring about the optimal

function of the state, the emperor is forced to realize this dialectic and adjust his own strategy to maneuver so that he can balance the power groups and try to reach the maximal equilibrium.

In his discussion on the ultrastable structure of the Chinese empire, Jin Guantao provides a vision of Chinese history that parallels that of the TV dramas. He argues a theory of internal forces that determine cyclical shifts between order and disorder throughout the entire imperial history.³³⁶ Inspired by the theory of homeostatic systems, Jin observes the Chinese empire as a mature, ultrastable living organism that has a powerful internal modulating scheme to maintain long-term stability. Specifically, the imperial ideology legitimizes the “the grand unity” and the literati-official social estate enforces the internal compromising power of the organism. Inasmuch as the literati officials are those who are detached from their native land and social background, they construct a mobile network to consolidate the otherwise divided society. With advanced transportation and communication systems, the emperor is able to transform aristocracy to meritocracy, and build a centralized bureaucratic system. However, along with the positive, or the organic force conducive to the unification, there is a built-in negative, or inorganic, force within the system to cause the gradual decay from within. Since it is almost impossible to prevent corruption in this huge bureaucratic system, or to prevent land annexation due to the territorial scale of the empire, the unification and internal equilibrium face constant challenge. Although the emperors in the earlier period of each dynasty have all tried to improve the situation, the marginal effect of reform is diminishing, and the empire is unavoidably declining. Such a structure exhibits rigidity instead of elasticity. That means, although the organic force is beneficial to gradually overcoming the inorganic

³³⁶ Jin Guantao, *Zai lishi de biaoxiang beihou—dui Zhongguo fengjian shehui chao wending jiegou de tansuo* (Behind the phenomena of history—an exploration of the ultrastable structure of the Chinese feudal society) (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1983).

force, its modulating effect is diminishing, so much so that at a certain point the organism will collapse entirely. Only after the organic force recovers its consolidating power, will the system return to its original equilibrium, which usually resulted from the shift of dynasties.

The inorganic, negative force harmful to the grand unification often comes from the imperial palace. According to Jin, it usually originates from the eunuchs and from imperial relatives through marriage. Generally, in order to secure his transcendent position, the emperor has to maximize the modulating power through balancing different power groups. To prevent the imperial princes and powerful generals from becoming dominant, he has to make use of relatives through marriage to balance them. To ensure his absolute authority, he usually trusts eunuchs working around him. Whenever the imperial relatives or the eunuchs are out of the emperor's control, the balance of the system is shaken. In that sense, the contradiction between the emperor's unlimited power and limited compromising ability constitutes the fundamental dilemma within the empire. In other words, the tension between the (extended) family and the empire provides the basic paradoxical energy which could lead to either positive or negative consequences. Whenever the emperor has overly indulged in his intimate life, enamored of one single woman or too trustful of the intimate eunuch, the power groups associated with the woman or the eunuch will overpower him, resulting in disorder and disunity in the empire. On the other hand, after the disorder, the wise emperor learns from the past lesson and balances the power groups to the advantage of the reunified empire, which will restore order and bring about prosperity.

Such an analysis offers a fresh perspective to look at the cyclical structure of imperial history as it appears on TV, and most importantly, it is possible to epitomize the gigantic organism at the core of its power—the imperial family—to describe the

flow of energy within the empire. In this light, if Jin's model manifests the dialectical *shi-trend* in a macrocosmic way in shaping Chinese history into a cyclical yet progressive structure, the empire representation in the novels and TV series displays a similar structure in a microcosmic way in dramatizing the tensions.

Indeed, the television series is the best form to visualize this dialectical movement of energy manifested in the empire representation. While suspense is necessary for holding the attention of the audience, the ever-changing, unpredictable tension among different power groups provides the ultimate source of energy flow within the representation. The multi-directional energies flow within the imperial family, operated and twisted to take turns, and finally converge in the emperor to achieve balance and harmony. Meanwhile, this at once centralized and egalitarian family setting puts the audience in the same flow of energies, for they could identify with any character in the drama and achieve emotional catharsis in the glory of the great emperor and the empire.

However, unlike the theory in which the basic tension is between the emperor's *unlimited* power and *limited* balancing ability, which ultimately leads to internal decay of the empire, in the TV series on the heroic emperors, the basic tension manifests itself as being between the emperor's *limited* power and *unlimited* modulating ability. Since the emperor is so aware of the negative consequence of his abuse of power, the pressure stimulates and brings out his talent and wisdom to imaginatively reconcile the powerful groups and congregate the energies to his advantage. Moreover, the empirical familial situation is more complicated than theory. Far from being independent with absolute authority, the young emperor in many cases is fettered by influential people around him. Besides the powerful officials who have potential to overthrow his throne, usually there is a mother, or grandmother, who has been helpful in his attaining the throne, yet continues trying to maintain her authority

over him. To balance the tension between filial piety and loyalty, the emperor is also forced to employ inventively rhetoric, strategy, and tactics, to strive for his autonomy. In a word, the successful emperors all stand outside this ultrastable, self-decaying imperial organism, and it is the TV series that visualizes their lives and accentuates their individual greatness.

The TV series The Great Emperor Wu of the Han

The best example to describe this “energy flow scheme” conducive to the image of the emperor is the TV series *Han Wu da di* (The Great Emperor Wu of the Han).³³⁷ Adapted directly from official history texts such as *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian) and the *Hanshu*, this serial drama successfully represents a heroic image of Emperor Wu (156-87BCE) of the Han dynasty, normally regarded as the greatest emperor since Qinshihuang unified China. It is under his reign that China achieved unprecedented glory in terms of both territorial expansion and civilization. The Huns (Xiongnu), the most powerful nomadic enemy who had constantly raided the border prior this period were decisively defeated and forced to succumb to the Han, and the famous “silk road” was pioneered to foster cultural and commercial exchange with the other civilizations. Most of all, the Chinese empire realized the unparalleled centralization of state power under the doctrine of Confucianism.

Broadcast during primetime on Channel One of CCTV, the series is seen as the serious representation of the Han dynasty and the emperor’s life. In the video edition, the series is advertised as follows:

He bequeathed a people confidence to proudly live through thousands of years;
his dynastic title became the eternal name of a great people; the greatest empire

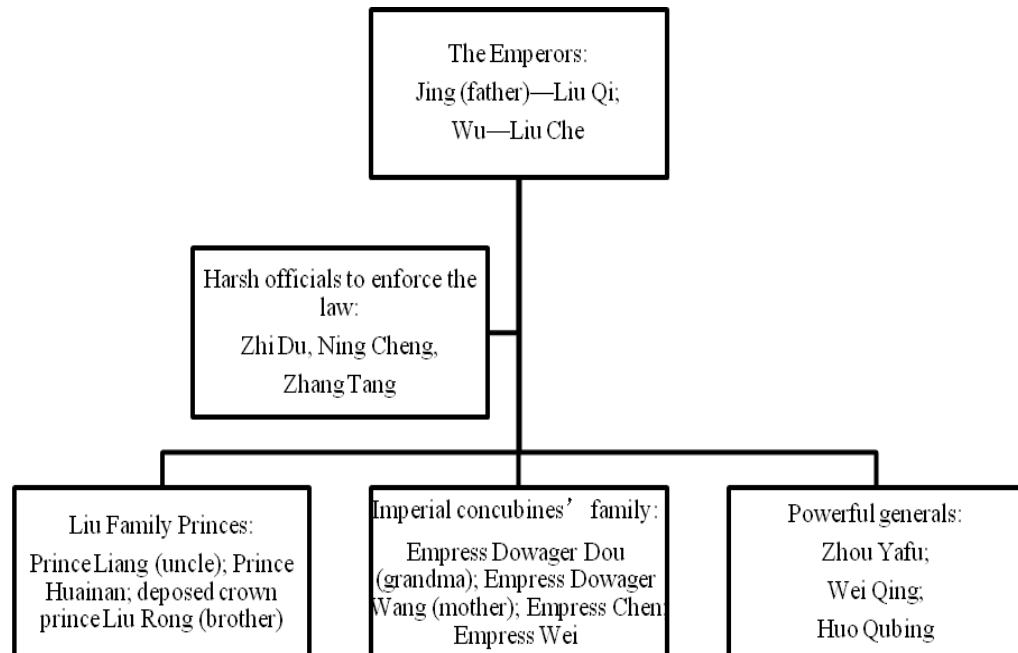
³³⁷ TV series *Han Wu da di*. Scriptwriter Jiang Qitao, director Yang Jun.

in Chinese history; the contemporary screen presents the cruelest battle in the warring history of thousands of years...³³⁸

Obviously, pride, glory, greatness, and martial achievement are the intrinsic qualities the series is dedicated to present in both the emperor and the Han Empire. However, not surprisingly, these grand qualities are also mainly exhibited in family settings, among the imperial family members and their associates.

The series comprises fifty-eight episodes, the first seventeen of which depict the Emperor Wu's childhood centered on his father, the Emperor Jing, who is troubled by trying to balance the power struggles among his mother, younger brother, other Liu family princes, and the imperial concubines, in order to build a peaceful foundation for his successor. An unfledged child without the title of the crown prince, the unprivileged young prince is already situated in the middle of the complicated swirl within the imperial family. The relationship between the father and son, hence, not only is crucial for the relative status within the family, but also determines the future of the empire. In this sense, the detailed portrayal of the Emperor Jing is far from being irrelevant or un-necessary, but vital for the growth of the young emperor. It is the father (under the influence of other family members) who determines his status as the new crown prince, and introduces him into the power machine of the empire. As Dou Ying comments on the emperor's intention to imprison the former crown prince, the father is removing the thorns for the next emperor, since every emperor in effect stays in a cluster of thorns. [Episode 14] It is the father who painstakingly tries to secure the centralized and transcendent status of the future emperor so as to pave the way for the son's future success. Generally, as emperors, the father and the son share the same position in the family and the empire. The position could be described in the following diagram:

³³⁸ VCD cover. *Hongen wenhua shiye youxian gongsi*. n.d.



(The network facing the emperor, with the relationship of relatives to Emperor Wu in parentheses)

Generally, both emperors (and all the emperors in imperial China) have to deal with three groups of people who have potential to pose the threat for the throne: the princes from the same imperial lineage with appointed fiefdoms, the families close to the emperor through marriage, and the powerful generals who have authority in the army. Of course, the three groups are not separate, but sometimes interacting and overlapping, and in most cases, they are in competition for wealth and power. For instance, in this drama, Prince Liang is also the favorite son of Empress Dowager Dou, and thus he has both the imperial blood and the Dou family's support. Similarly, generals Wei Qing and Huo Qubing are the relatives of Empress Wei, and their promotion cannot be totally separated from nepotism. The emperor is at once dependent upon them and scrupulous in employing them. In order to secure his rule, the emperor needs to negotiate with different groups to let them balance each other so that the contradictory energies among them could be transformed into positive energies to carry out his policies.

In addition to letting the different power groups balance each other, the emperor also needs to employ harsh officials who dare to challenge these powerful people to supervise all of them, to investigate crimes and enforce the law. On the one hand, this ensures that the emperor does not have to directly face the family members (especially those of his older generation); on the other hand, this is effective in preventing any single group from growing overly dominant.

The double structure of family and empire determines that the emperor's life is full of tensions and contradictions. Inasmuch as any family situation is also an affair of state, it forces the emperor to decide strategically when to obey a family rule (e.g. filial piety) and when to follow the law of the empire. The tension between the family and the empire, between different power groups, thus, constitutes the primary flow of energy to unfold the emperor's life, and to develop the plot of the TV series. Each episode presents one or several aspects of the tensions, generating suspense in leaving the tensions unresolved. Once the former tension is solved or power imbalance achieves equilibrium, new tensions appear, and a new imbalance awaits leverage. Moreover, the relative power position is in constant evolution, so much so that the positive and the negative energies are interchangeable, which renders the storyline unpredictable. For instance, Empress Dowager Wang (Lady Wang before she becomes the empress) and her brother Tian Fen represent the constructive force in the beginning in helping the young prince win the crown, yet they turn out to be relatively destructive after the young emperor takes the throne. The dramatic unpredictability not only facilitates creating the emperor as a hero with superb wisdom who can always sufficiently transform diverse energies into productive achievement, but also transfers the flow of energy to the audience, enfolding them in the field of family/empire to yearn for the final reconciliation among the powers.

Han Wu da di presents Emperor Jing as a far-sighted strategist and Emperor Wu as surpassing him in both civil and martial achievements. In the beginning, it shows that the greatest threat to the throne is “the rebellion of the seven princes.” Emperor Jing appoints the capable prince Liang, his own younger brother and favorite son of his mother, and the famous general Zhou Yafu together to appease the rebels. After the mission is accomplished, he promotes Zhou as a prime minister to deprive him of his authority in the army, and employs the harsh official Zhi Du to investigate Prince Liang to prevent him from being dominant. Later, when Prince Liang dies and the power structure becomes uneven, he finds an excuse to imprison General Zhou to eliminate his influence in the army. To secure the status of the new crown prince, he compels the divested former crown prince to commit suicide for a minor misdemeanor. To be sure, what Emperor Jing does is to identify different forces and balance them to make sure that the emperor is the only authority in court. Yet his way to achieve this is strategic: he knows exactly how to compromise between his obligation to the family (mother) and to the empire. In order to resolve a hot debate between a Confucian and a Daoist scholar, he takes contradiction as the source of productive energy and directs it to a harmonious track. When the two scholars insist on their doctrine and refuse to be reconciled, the emperor articulates his opinion in the presence of the crown prince:

You cannot say that a person does not know how to eat fish if he refuses to eat fish bone; you cannot say that a person does not know how to eat horsemeat if he refuses to eat the poisonous liver of the horse. [Episode 14]

Without commenting on either Confucianism or Daoism, he cleverly manifests his all-encompassing and pragmatic philosophical propensity, which also indirectly echoes his strategic manipulation of the powerful forces.

It is obvious that Emperor Wu inherits his father’s philosophy. Though he openly favors Confucianism over Daoism, he himself is far from a dedicated

Confucian. His military ambitions do not follow Confucian principle, and his political ambition proves a composite of traditional intellectual thinking. Princess Pingyang sees him as a Legalist, yet in his later age, he is shown advising his son to read more of Laozi.

Indeed, what we see is an all-embracing emperor with unprecedented ambition, wisdom, and tactical skill. In the beginning of his reign, he allows his grandmother's family to balance his mother's family so that none is overpowering; meanwhile, he secretly collects his own men to train cavalry preparing to launch the battle against the Xiongnu. When both grandmother and mother are dead, he has matured into an independent, decisive, and authoritative emperor with his own core of power to accomplish his desire to establish a great empire. No significant force could block his blueprint since he has learned to balance the power structure and elicited absolute admiration and loyalty from subordinates. However, the tension within the court and family never ceases, so that this not only pushes the narrative forward, but also accumulates the energy for the harmonious climax.

The image of the emperor is more heroic than perfect, and not all his treatment of situations is fair. In fact, more often than not, the audience is left to feel sympathetic toward some characters, thinking the emperor is merciless or overly suspicious. Such an emotional identification casts a shadow on the positive portrayal of the emperor's character, which, however, is balanced later in the presentation of the emperor's emotional release and the lyrical display of the harmonious relationship between the emperor and his subordinates, and between the emperor and the common people. Such emotional display, however, begs for embellishment in visual representations, in addition to the verbal exchange.

Between language and image: the performative space on television screen

The relationship between language and image can be best understood in the encounter between the emperor and the great general Wei Qing. The general crucial to carrying out the emperor's military plan, Wei Qing wins the decisive battle against the Xiongnu Hun. Yet the emperor becomes increasingly suspicious and prudent towards Wei's military influence. He divides Wei's military authority with another general, Huo Qubing, and deliberately ignores Wei. A loyal servant of the emperor since his youth, Wei undoubtedly feels sad yet remains silent, while his complaint is articulated by his wife Princess Pingyang. However, as his death approaches, Wei determines to go to the palace to see the emperor to talk about the crown prince, who is his nephew. Lying on a couch carried by servants, the sick general is enthusiastically greeted by the soldiers, who show their admiration and volunteer to shoulder his sedan couch, implying that Wei is widely revered by his soldiers. (Figure 6-1) On the other side, the emperor orders his eunuchs to dress him formally and rushes out to see Wei Qing when he is told that the general is coming. At the sight of Wei outside the palace, the emperor stops, anxiously watching Wei staggering up the steps. (Figure 6-2) The camera dwells on the eyes of the two men, sentimental music plays, and the camera begins cutting back and forth from the emperor to Wei struggling up the steps and then to flashbacks of the growth of the young general in the emperor's eyes, indicating their lifelong interdependent relationship. (Figures 6-3 and 6-4) Uttering "Your Majesty," Wei Qing eagerly approaches the emperor, who steps forward to embrace Wei Qing as he kneels. (Figure 6-5) Both are shown tearful to see each other. [Episode 55] Such an idealized portrayal of the relationship between the emperor and his subordinates not only shows the general's absolute loyalty toward the emperor as a foil to the latter's greatness, but also softens the emperor's image as a cold-faced strategist and renders

him accessible and forgivable, dispelling the past discord between them, and the necessary disharmony in the past now gives way to harmony.



Figure 6-1: The soldiers worship General Wei Qing and voluntarily gather to carry him



Figure 6-2: The emperor watches Wei Qing coming to the palace



Figure 6-3: The emperor steps down to welcome Wei Qing



Figure 6-4: Flashback of Wei Qing when he was young and conquered the Xiongnu Hun



Figure 6-5: Wei Qing kneels down in front of the emperor

The dialectical relationship between harmony and disharmony can be compared to the mutually dependent relationship between narrative and visual representation, between diegesis and mimesis. While the serial narrative requires disharmony to develop the plot, the visual representation transforms the disharmony to harmony that leads to dramatic climax and psychological catharsis.

Such a dramatic climax bears both historical and contemporary ideological significance. In fact, the meeting scene manifests a sense of architectural quality to put stratified discourses in harmony, which I will term as “stratification of image.” In other words, the scene visualizes the ideal hierarchical relationship between people, in a disguised, lyrical, and visually appealing way. The palace, the steps, upward and downward directions all signify the vertical structure of the social strata, while the lyrical song (which is strangely manifested as a popular love song),³³⁹ the public display of the reciprocal emotions exhibits the seemingly egalitarian relationship that softens, mitigates, and harmonizes the hierarchy. Symbolically, Wei Qing represents a hero from a lowly origin supported on the shoulders of the common people, and the emperor represents the lonely ruler standing against the backdrop of the empire. The lofty union of the ruler and the general, hence (in a way), idealizes the relationship between the lord and his subject, between the hero and the common people, and between the emperor and the empire. The reunion at once grants the hierarchy and masks it, suggesting the relationship as being both vertical and horizontal, naturalizing the harmonious social structure within the empire.

³³⁹ This might indicate the homoerotic (or homosexual) relationship between the emperor and the general, as some historical anecdotes suggest. Yet in the TV series, there is no indication that the emperor is bisexual. On the contrary, he is portrayed as a heterosexual, decisive hero. The love song mainly serves to idealize the relationship between the emperor and the general, given the contextual situation.

The visual harmony compensates for the narrative discordance, temporally balancing the endless contradictions. Whereas the narrative constantly creates tensions to attract attention, the image stratifies the discourses and reconciles them. In this sense, the television screen turns out to be a performative space to transfer the multi-directional forces, between the family and the empire, between language and image, and between the textual world and contextual world. It at once dramatizes and reconciles the multi-dimensional contradictions, and also in some way perpetuates the contradictions by problematizing the representation on screen.

The word “performative” is indebted to J. L. Austin’s speech act theory. For Austin, language is performative in the sense that it does not merely transmit information or describe things, but perform acts which produce significance beyond the boundary of that language. The language here refers to the constative statement, which is opposed to the performative: “the constative is language claiming to represent things as they are, to name things that are already there, and the performative is the rhetorical operations, the acts of language, that undermine this claim by imposing linguistic categories, bringing things into being, organizing the world rather than simply representing what is.”³⁴⁰ Similarly, in performance theory, performativity appears to be the dynamic competition between performance and its original text as authority.³⁴¹ In this sense, the model of the performative suggests the blurring of boundaries between the performance and its original representation, thereby leaving more possibilities open for interpretation.

From this perspective, my use of the term emphasizes the uncertainty and plurality manifested in the televisual representation, to uncover the possibly multiple

³⁴⁰ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: a Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 1997), 100.

³⁴¹ William.B.Worthen, “Drama, Performativity, and Performance,” *PMLA*, Vol. 113, No. 5 (Oct., 1998), 1093-1107.

understandings hidden in the closed structure of the TV series. On the one hand, the harmony among different discourses synthesized in images is not stable, but rather points to new contradictions; on the other hand, the tension between language and image problematizes the linguistic statement and intensifies the dramatic effects.

For instance, following the aforementioned unity achieved in the reunion of the emperor and the general, Wei Qing starts to persuade the emperor to keep the crown prince. Since he is both an important official in court and the uncle of the crown prince, Wei Qing's suggestion immediately provokes the emperor's suspicion. The emperor turns cold-faced and looks penetratingly into Wei's eyes, asking why he suddenly cares about the crown prince and whether he is sent by the empress and the prince. (Figure 6-6) The suspicious eyes and the sharp tone completely overturn the harmony manifested in the moving reunion scene a moment before, implying that another round of tension is set in motion. The harmony just achieved through the stratification of image thus leaves the temporary resolution open, giving way to new contradictions.



Figure 6-6: The emperor becomes suspicious of Wei Qing's intention

On the other hand, the emperor's facial expression and tone also destabilize his speech. Whereas he does reassure Wei Qing that he would not change the candidate for his successor, his face suggests that he is discontented with the crown prince. (Figure 6-7) The later episodes prove that he never really liked or trusted the crown prince, which leads finally to deposing him.



Figure 6-7: The emperor reassures Wei Qing that he trusts the crown prince to be a good emperor, but his facial expression shows otherwise.

The double suspicion towards both language and image manifests the great performative capacity of the television series. That means, in a medium like this, the language and image often betray each other, which keeps the narrative alive to evoke psychological attachment. The tension between language and image is far from a new concern for critics. As is commonly recognized, language is in nature analytic, articulating meaning explicitly, whereas image is in nature descriptive, provoking the

use of language to make a statement about the meaning.³⁴² While language can pin down meanings from an image, an image can tell more than language. In his cinema books, Gilles Deleuze distinguishes the silent film and talking cinema, suggesting that once film incorporates language into image so that the language could be immediately and transparently received by the audience, the language then becomes part of the image while at the same time engendering something new from the image beyond the frame of the language. In his words:

The silent cinema carried out a division of the visible image and the readable speech. But when speech makes itself heard, it is as if it makes something new visible, and the visible image, denaturalized, begins to become readable in turn, as something visible or visual. The latter, from this point, acquires problematic values or a certain equivocal quality which it did not have in the silent cinema. What the speech-act makes visible, interaction, may always be badly deciphered, read, seen: hence a whole rise in the lie, in deception, which takes place in the visual image.³⁴³

This is indeed the performativity of image. Language is performative in the sense that the speech act manifests something other than the speech itself; similarly, image is performative in the sense that it makes the acts visible, therefore renders linguistic statement problematic.

The television dramatic series, recognized as a genre with narrative dominating image, may have the most potential capacity for this performativity. To put it in another way, insofar as the dramatic contradictions are pushed forward by talking, the image can always subvert the words to problematize the narrative, to question the character's verbal expressions, and to intensify the dramatic effect.

In a word, image and language interdependently betray, compensate, and balance each other to render the television screen a performative space, to construct an

³⁴² Paul Messaris, *Visual Literacy, Image, Mind, and Reality* (Boulder, San Francisco, & Oxford: Westview Press, 1994), 22.

³⁴³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: the Time Image*, 229.

energy-flow scheme to balance the family and the empire, the emperor and “Tianxia,” and spill the energies over into the audience.

The most obvious scene to portray the relationship between Emperor Wu and “Tianxia” is the one in which the aged emperor with his little son (the future emperor) visits the martyr’s village. [Episode 58] Since the majority of the village men have been enlisted to fight against the Xiongnu Hun, the village now is full of disabled veterans and starved women and children. While the emperor is at first enthusiastic about the glory of the heroic village, he is shocked by what he sees: aged veterans deformed, haggard women in rags, and skinny children naked. Although the veterans show great zest in seeing the emperor, in a loving, admiring rather than distant or fearful way, he cannot help feeling guilty about the cost of his military aggression. (Figure 6-8) Standing in front of the monument of the martyrs against the ordinary people kowtowing at his back, the emperor silently sheds tears, murmuring to himself: “no war anymore.” Upon the inquiry of the little prince, he holds the boy up in his arms, symbolically placing the future emperor among the common people, between the dead and the living, and between foreign and domestic affairs. (Figure 6-9 and 6-10) Indeed, the image puts the emperor among, rather than above, the common people, figuratively suggesting the logic of the empire—“Minxin-Tianxia.”



Figure 6-8: The emperor is dismayed by what he sees in the veteran's village



Figure 6-9: The emperor stands in front of the monument of the martyrs



Figure 6-10: The emperor holds up the little prince standing between the monument and the people behind him

In the succeeding sequence, we are told that an attempted assassination has been prevented in the palace. It is the former prince of the Xiongnu Hun, now the bodyguard of the emperor, who saves the emperor's life. The conversation between the emperor and the Xiongnu prince suggests that the Xiongnu Huns are absolutely subdued by the Chinese, both militarily and psychologically, implying great accomplishment and harmony in foreign affairs. On the other hand, the assassination, together with the experience in the martyr's village, reminds the emperor of the domestic disharmony. He later delivers a rescript of self-accusation to all under Heaven to criticize himself for being so militarily ambitious and ignorant of the people's living condition, promising that the future policy would be focused on the rehabilitation of the people's wellbeing. Thus far, it completes the loop of the emperor's life. While he reconciles forces and accumulates the domestic resources to achieve the glory in territorial expansion, it is also the domestic people's welfare that

constrains and holds back his personal ambition. While he learns to manipulate, balance different forces to transform them to his advantage, he is far from being a free man who can carry out his plan at will. In fact, what he does can only be justified in the framework of the empire. It is the empire, or all under Heaven, that legitimizes his behavior, and organizes the diversified forces into the highest level of harmony.

Indeed, without the discourse of the empire, the emperor's life would be full of inexplicable mistakes and unspeakable cruelty. For instance, after he decides to pass the throne to the under-aged prince, he forces the prince's mother, the young, beautiful, mystically renowned Lady Gouyi, to die immediately so that the mother's family cannot dominate the future young emperor. Such a decision manifests the emperor's far-sighted vision and determination, yet also perpetuates the tension between the empire and the family, which makes the Chinese empire a continuous flow of both positive and negative energies, and which puts the emperor in both a transcendent and empirical situation.

The emperor's double identity makes it hard to evaluate his life accomplishment. This is what the otherwise closed-structured TV series leaves open for the audience. The series is framed by the conversation between the aged emperor and the great historian Sima Qian. In the first episode and the last episode, Emperor Wu is shown talking with the historian about his historical writing, especially Sima's evaluation of him. It is as if the entire drama is folded within the historian's book, out of the historian's writing, which is in fact the producer's claim. However, the appearance of Sima Qian in the drama ironically destabilizes the historian's writing, rendering the established perspective problematic.

After reading the historian's book on himself, the emperor is infuriated to the extent that he first orders the book burned, then changes his mind, yet spits a mouthful of blood and faints on the huge pile of bamboo slips. Later during the meeting with

Sima Qian, he expresses his respect for the historian's righteousness and courage, yet continues to defend himself for what he did, suggesting that nobody could really understand his ambition, accomplishment, and sacrifice in order to build a great empire. Apparently moved by the emperor's sincere speech, Sima Qian admits that the emperor is the greatest ruler for a thousand years, his achievement beyond the reach of others. Still insisting on keeping the objectivity of historical recording, he nevertheless implies that he might lack the perspective to write about the emperor, which to some degree denies his own writing. [Episode 58]

There are, perhaps, two functions of this conversation scene. One is to show the emperor's dramatic reaction toward the book, further accentuate his character as an overbearing yet open minded hero, and provide an opportunity for the emperor to defend himself; the other is to exhibit Sima Qian's response to the emperor, to question the historian's ability to write about such a great hero, and thus cast doubt on the objectivity of the historical account.

Needless to say, such a scene serves to glorify the emperor's image, liberate the emperor from the historical writing, and reinsert him in the emperor's own narrative, the narrative that justifies his goal to establish a great empire. It is the discourse of empire, rather than the historian's writing, that enfolds the emperor, the discourse that elevates the emperor's cacophonous life into the highest harmony yet at the same time leaves the evaluation of the emperor open. At the end of the series, the voiceover states that shortly after Emperor Wu's death, the Xiongnu Hun divided into two groups due to the multiple attacks from the Han. One group went to China to live with the Chinese people, and the Xiongnu Hun as a people gradually disappeared owing to assimilation among the Chinese. The Chinese empire hence also consists of the blood of the Xiongnu.

Thus ends the TV series of *Great Emperor Wu of Han*. The scheme of energy flow finally leads to the great harmony of the Chinese empire—the inclusion of the Xiongnu Hun, symbolic of the all-encompassing, assimilative, and centripetal power of China. The emperor's image is thus overlapped with the empire's image manifested in the Great Wall, with the latter replacing the former, implying that while the emperor is deceased, the empire stays, in the images of the eternal landscape.

Conclusion

It is significant that the “emperor series”—spanning two thousand years of history from the first emperor Qinshihuang to the Qing emperors—all adopted a similar representational strategy. The imagination of the empire is opened up through the representation of the imperial family, and the theme of balance and harmony is the common trait among the representations. Even in the most prosperous, ascendant periods of history, as in the reigns of emperors Han Wudi, Tang Taizong, Qing Kangxi, et cetera, the representations seek to dramatize empirical contradictions and leave harmony and abundance as the goal to be achieved or the background to be remembered. Each representation could be regarded as the epitome of the imperial history, one that favors practicality over idealism, while the notion of “Tianxia” is omnipresent. In other words, even though the TV series idealize the image of the emperors and their relationship with the people, the dramatic portrayal of the empirical situation accentuates the difficulty of achieving that kind of ideal. It delivers the message that, even in the most glorious historical period, it is hard for an emperor to succeed in managing affairs of state and carrying out an imperial blueprint. This is proved true in other TV series as much as in *Han Wu da di*. As director Hu Mei defended the glorification of Emperor Yongzheng's image in the TV series *Yongzheng wangchao* (The reign of Yongzheng), she took Yongzheng as a reformist and the TV

series was aimed at dramatizing the hardship he faced during his reform to accentuate his heroic image:

There is a latent theme in *Yongzheng wangchao*. That is, it is the difficulty of managing state affairs (zhi guo nan 治国难), and also the difficulty of benefiting the people (li min nan 利民难). For Kangxi to treat everyone generously and with tolerance is difficult; for Yongzheng to be strict and severe with subordinates is also difficult. In a word, it is hard to manage the “family.” (dang jia nan 当家难)³⁴⁴

Setting aside the analogy between state affairs and family affairs, which has been discussed at length, the sympathetic attitude toward the emperor in Hu Mei’s speech as well as in the TV series implies the understanding and sympathy toward contemporary reform. Insofar as “it is difficult,” it requires patience and faith in the leadership from the people to support the reform. The “empire representation,” hence, provides a justification for the side effect caused by contemporary economic reform on the one hand, and reassuring precedents in the prior periods on the other.

Contemporary society has witnessed enough social discord: the growing income gap between the rich and the poor, the disadvantaged working class expressing discontent in the competitive market, the corrupt government officials trying to seek “rent” from the economic reform, and the disoriented people struggling in the spiritual void... All these problems challenge the legitimacy of the reform and the market economy. Coincidentally, the historical TV series, especially the emperor series, all in one way or another address these kinds of problems, and provide a reassuring “cure” centered on the heroic emperors. Nevertheless, the “cure” is not so concrete or pragmatic as to suggest an effective way to resolve the problems, but rather symbolic

³⁴⁴ Interview with Hu Mei. See Fang Jinyu, “‘Gaige huangdi’ zouhong yingping, *Yongzheng wangchao* huobao jingcheng” (The reformist emperor is hot on screen, *Yongzheng Dynasty* explodes in Beijing) in Feng Xingge et al, eds., *Jujiao “huangdi zuojia” Eryuehe* (Focus on the “emperor writer” Eryuehe) (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2003), 160.

and transcendent as manifested in the discourse of “Tianxia” and in the images of harmony and abundance.

In this sense, the support of the “empire representation” from the central government is not so much an endorsement of traditional values, nor an attempt to directly identify with the past ruling houses, but rather the effort to elicit faith (in the government), confidence, and national pride from the people. On the other hand, the semi-autonomous “field” of television suggests that there has been this bottom-up demand for the “empire representation,” especially from the educated audience. The production and consumption of the historical TV series, therefore, manifested itself as the convergence of the public appeal. Besides the psychologically reassuring function of this genre symptomatic of contemporary social reality, it seems, there is the paradigmatic, enduring imperial thinking—the “imperial-time regime”—that is deeply-rooted in the Chinese public and constantly conveys its transcendent value throughout history.

PART IV

Minority Historical Fiction: Alternative History of the Chinese Empire

To conclude, minority has two meanings that are related, no doubt, but very distinct. First of all, minority denotes a state of rule, that is to say, the situation of a group that, whatever its size, is excluded from the majority, or even included, but as a subordinate fraction in relation to the standard measure of that regulates the law and establishes the majority. ... There follows a second meaning: minority no longer denotes a state of rule, but a becoming in which one enlists. To become-minority.

---Gilles Deleuze *One Less Manifesto*³⁴⁵

In summer 2004, when I was traveling in Beijing, I noticed that the taxi drivers were all consumed by a serial radio broadcast entitled *Wolf Totem*, which tells a story of a Beijing educated youth (*zhiquing*) raising a wolf cub in the inner Mongolian grassland during the Cultural Revolution. What attracted the audience is not just a nostalgic portrayal of one's youth, however, or an emotionally-charged story of "man and his pet,"³⁴⁶ but what is hidden in the image of the wolf—the lupine spirit. I later realized that the radio broadcast was adapted from a bestseller literary piece—a combination of fiction, history, and sociopolitical lecture by Jiang Rong,³⁴⁷ pseudonym of a social science professor.

Wolf Totem engendered a phenomenal sensation in contemporary China, not only because it portrays a heartbreaking story between man and wolf, or the breathtaking landscape and exotic lifestyle on the Mongolian grassland, but also because it articulates a bold argument about Chinese civilization and national

³⁴⁵ Gilles Deleuze, "One Less Manifesto: Theater and Its Critique" in *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime*, ed. Timothy Murray, (Ann Arbor: The university of Michigan Press, 1997), 255.

³⁴⁶ Haiyan Lee, "The Lord of the Wolves" in the online source: *The China Beat: Blogging How the East is Read*, June 19th, 2008. Electronic access: <http://thechinabeat.blogspot.com/2008/06/lord-of-wolves.html>

³⁴⁷ The English translation of the novel by Howard Goldblatt does not include the excerpts from the historical documents at the beginning of each chapter and the appendix—the lengthy lecture on Chinese civilization.

characteristics from a minority perspective. It adds another layer to the contemporary “empire fever,” leading people to re-pondering the past Chinese Empire, not from the centripetal, Han-centered, moralistic historical perspective, but from a centrifugal direction, proposing a vital, rather than supplemental, function of the ethnic minorities for the prosperity of Chinese civilization. Moreover, it suggests that minorities contribute to Chinese history, not only through territorial expansion, but also through spiritual rejuvenation. In other words, rather than being culturally deprived barbarians assimilated by Chinese civilization, minorities help perpetuate the civilization by infusing the much-needed competitive spirit and energy to the degenerate, static Chinese society.

To some extent, *Wolf Totem* brought to a climax the discussion of Chinese empire and Chinese history, which I will come back to later in this chapter. What struck me as significant is that it concludes more than a decade’s writing on Chinese history from a minority perspective. These writings, which I will term “minority historical fiction,” are the focus of this section.

What is minority historical fiction?

When the seemingly objective, following-the-history-books, media-friendly historical representations occupy the center stage of mass culture, the so called “serious” literary field has also turned its attention to imperial history. The once experimentalist, vanguardist writers such as Su Tong, Zhang Chengzhi, and Wang Anyi also projected their imagination onto the cultural screen of the past Chinese Empire. However, they often situate themselves in a marginal position to write about imperial history, from either an individual or a minority perspective, to create an imagined, alternative account that de-centers and deconstructs the totality of the well-established, dominant, official history. Since their works are often connected with

minority ethnic groups, I characterize them as “minority historical fiction.” These works usually depict a lifestyle or spiritual pursuit specific to a certain minority group, yet they all attempt to elicit universal or transcendent values or characteristics that could be critical and constitutive of the perpetuation of Chinese civilization. They are also inclined to make general comments on Chinese history, in terms of Han-minority interactions, the recognition of which plays a critical part in the ever-expanding representation of the Chinese Empire from the minority perspective.

To some extent, minority historical fiction shares some territory with both root-searching literature and new historical fiction. Emerging from the mid-1980s and exemplified by works by writers like Han Shaogong and A Cheng, root-searching literature characterizes the literary landscape in contrast to that of the Mao’s era. As Huang Ziping pointed out, rather than portraying an ethical, utilitarian world in which a “great man” has “morality, responsibility, and a sense of vocation” to strive for his ideal and self-realization in Mao’s era, root-searching literature emphasizes the “aesthetic situation, the atmosphere, the cultural sedimentation, the celebration of the power of nature, the unrefined, wild and basic beauty in the crude, primitive mode of life.”³⁴⁸ Minority writers such as Zhang Chengzhi, A Lai, Zhaxi Dawa, and Han writers like Wang Anyi, Gao Jianqun could be loosely put into this group.³⁴⁹

On the other hand, new historical fiction is brewed by writers who “are engrossed in re-creating an aura of history, or in an aesthetic of historical imagination. They are concerned with the peripheral rather than the dominant, the legendary rather than the logical, and the individual rather than the integral, breaking corporate wholes

³⁴⁸ Huang Ziping, *Xingcunzhe de wenxue* (Literature of the survivors) (Taipei, 1992) 192. See Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 1997), 138.

³⁴⁹ Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997) 137; Howard Yuen Fung Choy, *Remapping the Past: Fictions of History in Deng’s China 1979-1997* (Ph.D dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder, 2004), 85.

into fragmentary cases.”³⁵⁰ Put otherwise, “New historical fiction” comprises those works that are free from the paradigm of traditional historical writing, those that replace historical research with fiction, and those that attempt to convey a discourse rather than represent historical reality. In other words, writers “cease to think with historical materials, but rather, take history itself as the material of thinking.”³⁵¹ Writers like Mo Yan, Su Tong, Yu Hua, and other aforementioned writers have practiced such writings.

Needless to say, both concepts are loosely defined, and writers themselves usually don’t agree on such categorizations. What is significant here is the attention given to the paradigmatic shift in the literary world. Inasmuch as writers consciously choose the aesthetic over the didactic, the poetic over the political, the periphery over the central, they automatically take a marginal stance against the official, dominant account of history. What is at stake here is both the individual identity and the national identity. “History” in both categories of literature remains an amorphous figure that explicitly or implicitly deconstructs and subverts the totality of the linear, homogeneous, official history. Consequently, these types of literature engage in an ongoing project of creating an alternative history, problematize and de-center the existent definition of national identity, and negotiate a new national identity from a marginal, minority perspective.

In this regard, minority historical fiction could be placed either in “root-searching literature” or in “new historical fiction,” filtered through the lens of imperial history. Specifically, for our purpose of analysis, there are three categories of minority historical fiction. The first category consists of those portrayals of Chinese history from a marginal, individual perspective, for example, Su Tong’s fictional depiction of

³⁵⁰ Howard Yuen Fung Choy. *Remapping the Past: Fictions of History in Deng’s China, 1979-1997*, (Ph.D dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder, 2004), 22.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

the imperial history. The second category compromises those that manifest the continuity of premodern and modern history regarding family lineage and ethnic interactions, for instance, Wang Anyi's *Fact and Fiction* (Jishi yu xugou 纪实与虚构), Gao Jianqun's *The Last Xiongnu Hun* (Zuihou yige Xiongnu 最后一个匈奴). The third one includes those that identify with the ethnic minority groups, romanticize the minority cultures, criticize yet also complement the Han cultural center, for instance, Zhang Chengzhi's *Spiritual History* (Xinling shi 心灵史) and Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem* (Lang Tuteng, 狼图腾).³⁵² Needless to say, these categories are interrelated and overlap. The individual, familial, and national identifications all have to do with the search for both individual identity and national identity.

Gilles Deleuze used to take minority as a critical term in power relations. He defines minority as either concrete or abstract, either in terms of a state of rule, or in terms of a cultural stance that is still becoming. In his words:

To conclude, minority has two meanings that are related, no doubt, but very distinct. First of all, minority denotes a state of rule, that is to say, the situation of a group that, whatever its size, is excluded from the majority, or even included, but as a subordinate fraction in relation to the standard measure of that which regulates the law and establishes the majority. ... There follows a second meaning: minority no longer denotes a state of rule, but a becoming in which one enlists. To become-minority. ... Minority here denotes the strength of a becoming while majority designates the power or weakness of a state, of a situation.³⁵³

For Deleuze, minority signifies both the actual being and the potential becoming. In the first sense, minority represents the fewer in number, the subaltern, and the powerless, for instance, women. In the second sense, minority nevertheless implies a self-reflexive attitude, self-critical consciousness, and the power of false

³⁵² Strictly speaking, *Wolf Totem* is not a novel about imperial history. But because it provides a lengthy lecture as the appendix in the end discussing Chinese history and civilization, I include this novel as the concluding part of the chapter.

³⁵³ Gilles Deleuze, "One Less Manifesto: Theater and Its Critique," in *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime*, ed. Timothy Murray, (Ann Arbor: The university of Michigan Press, 1997), 255.

identification. In his words, “everyone is a becoming-woman, a becoming-woman who acts as everyone’s potentiality.”³⁵⁴

In light of this definition, contemporary minority historical fiction thus contains both layers of minority: both as a material existence of ethnic minority groups and as a consciousness of becoming-minority. On one level, these literary works make visible the lifestyles and values of the minority groups that used to be overlooked in the majority cultural landscape; on another level, they represent the tendency to deconstruct the unitary portrayal of Chinese culture and history. Critically and self-reflexively, they participate in the ongoing discussion of redefining China’s self identity in terms of minority-majority, periphery-center, and individual-society interactions.

However, considered further, no matter how much intertwined, the two layers of minority nonetheless require two different approaches in order to act like minority. Whereas the first one—the actual being minority—starts from the margin, having to assimilate itself with the majority in order to be recognized and listened to, the second one departs from the center so that “becoming minority” is a self-critical gesture or tendency. In other words, they work in centripetal and centrifugal directions, respectively.

If for Deleuze, minority is most and foremost about “subversion” of majority, the centrifugal and centripetal directions nevertheless render the “subversion” indiscernible. In the Chinese case, minority historical fiction manifests a much more complex relationship with the majority historical representation, with regard to the double meanings of minority. On the one hand, minority writers, for instance, the Hui ethnic minority writer Zhang Chengzhi and female writer Wang Anyi, still adopt the patriarchal, Han-centered discourse to convey their minority status; on the other hand,

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

however, even though they represent a divergent, centrifugal force from the official history or discourse, all these writers are promoted by, or even reside in, the literary center. They either have won major literary prizes, or have attracted considerable attention from the literary society and the intellectual world. To some extent, they represent the literary trend of the 1990s.

If margin and center, being-minority and becoming-minority are indistinguishable from each other, minority then must have ceased to be unidirectionally subversive. If becoming-minority signifies a major literary trend coexistent with the mainstream mass culture, not only in the sense of the avant-garde literature manifested in form, but in the sense of historical representation manifested in content, then minority literature has lost its purpose as minority. Its function must be two-fold: both centrifugal and centripetal.

Homi Bhabha once discussed the strategy of minority. By adopting the language of the dominant discourse, minority makes itself a supplementary force to interrogate the solidity of mainstream social power. In his words:

The minority does not simply confront the pedagogical, or powerful master-discourse with a contradictory or negating referent. It does not turn contradiction into a dialectical process. It interrogates its object by initially withholding its objective. Insinuating itself into the terms of reference of the dominant discourse, the supplementary antagonizes the implicit power to generalize, to produce the sociological solidity.³⁵⁵

Whereas it is persuasive that the minority has to be strategic in order to be recognized, Homi Bhabha failed to stress enough the flipside of the strategy: inasmuch as the minority accommodates itself to play the game with the dominant discourse, it at once questions and constitutes the unity of the dominant discourse by expanding the

³⁵⁵ Homi Bhabha, "DissemiNation," in *Nation and Narration* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), 306.

scope of it. In the Chinese context, instead of simply being subversive of mainstream Chinese culture or history, minority historical fiction creates a parallel narrative that contributes to the diversity and unity of the multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic Chinese culture.

It is noteworthy that being subversive and being constitutive are not contradictory in this sense, as they target different objects. While the object of “subversion” is the mainstream historical discourse within China, the object of “constitution” is the China related to the imagined West. Indeed, the complex relationships reflected in the minority historical fiction manifest the double-layered relationships between the minority and the majority within China, and between China and the West.

For centuries, the minority ethnic groups have been regarded as culturally inferior barbarians. Only after they were sinicized or civilized could they be included in the Chinese Empire, no matter whether they were ethnic subalterns or imperial rulers. In modern China, as historians have observed, the Chinese government has continued the civilizing project toward their minority brothers.³⁵⁶ In assuming to have cultural superiority, the central government was able to incorporate the minorities into its unified history following a linear and rigidly structured historical narrative of progress.³⁵⁷

Needless to say, this linear historical narrative has put China in an awkward situation in modern world history. The ambivalent sentiment of acknowledging technological inferiority yet at once insisting on moral superiority compared to the West, as we discussed in previous chapters, has led to the substitution of a re-

³⁵⁶ Stevan Harrell, *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 79.

³⁵⁷ Jonathan N. Lipman, Introduction to *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), xxi.

conceived Marxism for the deeply ingrained imperial thinking. On the other hand, within China, the Han-centered Chinese government presumes a complete package of superiority over the minorities, both morally and technologically. The double standard towards the outside and inside, inevitably, allows room for the *stratification* of identification in minority literature. Inasmuch as the writers could identify with either the minority group or Chinese, their works could be subversive of the official narrative on account of ethnic interactions, or could be constitutive of the unity of Chinese history by inventing the minority to re-imagine Chinese characteristics in the world arena, or both. In general, the minority historical fiction under examination here consists of both layers of identification: with minority and with China. As a result, they at once rebel against the totality of official historical narrative, bring about the crucial contribution of minority to the Chinese Empire, and express the nationalistic concern by trying to re-imagine, or reconfigure Han-minority relations to improve China's status in the world.

The common characteristics of minority historical fiction

Simply stated, minority historical fiction includes those works that delineate Chinese imperial history from a marginal, minority perspective. At the current stage, there are not many in quantity, and they are quite diverse. Despite their diversity, they nonetheless share some common characteristics.

Characteristic 1: the dialectic between the centripetal and the centrifugal

As discussed above, what distinguishes minority historical fiction from the conventionally written historical novels represented by Ling Li or Eryuehe's works is that, though both about the Chinese Empire, they portray the imperial history from different perspectives. If history writing is to convey historical knowledge, and the historical novel is to make use of the available historical knowledge to create stories,

then Ling Li and Eryuehe's "emperor series" belong to the centripetal historical novel that renders commonly known history to make it "*re-appear*" centered on the emperors and the Empire, whereas minority historical fiction belongs to the centrifugal type of historical novel that makes the local, suppressed, or unknown history "*appear*" from a minority perspective.³⁵⁸

However, on the other hand, minority historical fiction does not negate the mainstream history by simply dismissing the function of the imperial center or Chinese civilization; rather, it incorporates the minority into the foundation of the Chinese Empire, creating an alternative history that parallels and complements the official history. Celebrating the crucial function of minorities in the past, they serve to re-imagine and re-construct unified, more balanced, and better-conceived national characteristics in the present and future. In other words, "what they write" is marginal in the official history, yet "why they write this way" manifests the nationalistic concern and reinforces the image of a unified empire from a minority perspective.

Characteristic 2: The dialectic between the temporalization of the space and spatialization of history

Critics have characterized contemporary historical fiction, especially the so called "new historical fiction", as "spatialization of history."³⁵⁹ Since the narrative is engaged in the rewriting of histories that focus on the local places, the teleological, unilinear, official history has been turned into fragmentary, space-specific histories. "By changing the tradition of 'once upon a time' to the fiction of 'once upon a place,'"

³⁵⁸ In a recent talk, "The Historical Novel in Postmodernity," Frederic Jameson mentioned that the post-modern historical novel is to "make history appear," suggesting the subversive and deconstructive effect of the postmodern historical novel. I am borrowing his notion of "making history appear," though I am not quite sure about the definition for "postmodern." See Jameson's talk in the Colloquium "Between History and Narrative: Colloquium in Honor of Hayden White," University of Rochester, April 24-25, 2009.

³⁵⁹ Howard Yuen Fung Choy, *Remapping the Past: Fictions of History in Deng's China 1979-1997* (Ph. D dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder, 2004); also Lin Qingxin, *Brushing History Against the Grain* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 17. Lin suggests that the new historical fiction shares a mode of "spatial narration."

as Howard Yuen Fung Choy noted, “the spatialization of history flattens the past into a plane surface or, more precisely, a map, on which the shadows of the past are projected without the depth and weight of ‘the whole truth’ of history. None of these shadows can be seen as history itself; rather, they are the other of history, a fabulous analogy of it.”³⁶⁰

As much as I agree with Choy that “the spatialization of history” cannot be seen as history itself, I believe that alternative histories are more than just depthless shadows. In the case of minority historical fiction, even though the minority places, the Mongol grassland or the Shanbei Plateau, for example, are the focus to construct an alternative history, these places nonetheless embody the transcendent values that are crucial to Chinese history. By discovering and rearticulating these values, writers turned these minority places into everlasting cultural spaces that bear the same weight of history. Instead of reducing these places to an uncivilized world that is left behind according to the linear, progressive historical time frame, minority historical fiction celebrates the nomadic spirit and universal values prevalent in minority places and promotes them to a national level. In other words, those values have transcended the local spaces and become national characteristics. As a result, the backward minority space shares the same time with the Han majority space. Therefore, along with the “spatialization of history,” there is also “temporalization of space.”

Characteristic 3: The dialectic between diversity and unity

Needless to say, minority historical fiction displays miscellaneous cultural scenes as the writers devoted themselves to the portrayal of various times and spaces and to the experimentation with different writing skills. Nevertheless, insofar as there is “stratification of identification” and China is an overpowering entity to identify with, the alternative histories indicated in the minority historical fiction nevertheless

³⁶⁰ Howard Yuen Fung Choy, *Remapping the Past: Fictions of History in Deng's China 1979-1997*, 11.

manifest a deeply-ingrained historical understanding: unification is the key to the blossoming of the Chinese Empire. For instance, they all incorporate the ethnic minority cultures into the Han-centered culture, all take the unification of the Chinese Empire as normal yet celebrate the functions of minorities. They either justify the historical *shi*-trend by means of strength, or criticize the Chinese center in terms of its lack of morality or competitive drive. The normalization of unification, justification of the historical trend, and de-legitimizing of the winner's behavior all prove the other side of the imperial-time regime: its centripetal and centrifugal effects are also played out in the contemporary minority literature.

As we can see in the following analysis, specifically, Su Tong's fictive history de-legitimizes and de-sublimates Chinese history. A fictive, illegitimate emperor's dramatic life suggests an ahistorical, metaphorical account of history: an individual is the victim of imperial structure, and only by escaping from that structuring could one gain freedom and enlightenment. Chinese history is one that is corrupt, decadent, and full of internal struggle, one that consumes the energy that should have been used on more lofty, productive causes. On the other hand, Wang Anyi and Gao Jianqun's family histories link the minority groups with national characteristics, attribute the rebellious, the revolutionary, and the productive spirits to the nomadic peoples, and reveal the positive function of minority cultures in Chinese history. Further, Zhang Chengzhi and Jiang Rong's works discover the spiritual values that the Han cultural center lacks. They not only comment on the Chinese national characteristics in contrast to the minority spirit, but also attempt to seek the national cure from the minority cultures. Especially Jiang Rong, echoes Lu Xun's discussion of Chinese characteristics early last century, but instead of trying to find the national cure from the West, advocates a "Chinese nomadic spirit" inspired by the wolf totem in Mongolian culture.

Becoming-Minority: Chinese Characteristics in Minority Historical Fiction

Walter Benjamin once described an automaton chess game as a metaphor for historical materialism. This automaton is designed to win all the games of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet sits before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors creates the illusion that the table is transparent. However, in fact, an expert chess player sits inside the table and guides the puppet's hands by means of strings. Benjamin mockingly suggests that the puppet is called "historical materialism" as it will win in all circumstances.³⁶¹

Following the discussions in previous chapters, I would like to borrow this metaphor and suggest that, philosophically and symbolically, the puppet is called the "Chinese Empire" and the expert is the "imperial-time regime." Moreover, in addition to making the table look transparent, the mirrors reflect all the moves between the puppet and the opponents. Minority historical fiction, in this regard, represents part of the fragmentary reflections in the mirrors.

This chapter will examine these fragmentary reflections of Chinese imperial history, from a marginal, individual, minority perspective. The works range from Su Tong's fictive account about imperial history to Jiang Rong's wolf epic on the Mongol grassland. They manifest the multi-layered, diverse interactions between the minority and the majority, yet in the meantime, they converge in constructing positive national characteristics to re-imagine Chinese history and redefine national identity.

³⁶¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 253.

Su Tong's Wu Zetian and My Life as Emperor: individual against history

Among Su Tong's historical fictional works, which are normally considered as "new historical fiction,"³⁶² only two are set in imperial times: *My Life as Emperor* and *Wu Zetian*. Even though Su Tong refuses to take these novels as "new historical fiction,"³⁶³ and believes that these two novels portray two different kinds of history,³⁶⁴ the two novels nonetheless fit into the category of "new historical fiction" in the sense of "taking history itself as the material of thinking."

Indeed, in both novels, imperial history appears to be the star-crossed background of the individual's life. Through poetic language, metaphor, and imagery, history, as an abstract concept, is conveyed as a culture, an atmosphere, a spell, a bottomless abyss that would eventually swallow the rationality, beauty, and humanity of the characters. The court struggle, or the imperial culture, creates an inescapable web of signification that determines the position, the role of its players. The identity of the characters is pre-determined, loaded with foretold warnings. Any attempt to change one's fate will result in irrational choices and catastrophic consequences. In a word, imperial history is a life-destroying power regime. Rather than an ideal Confucian society characterized by order and morality, it is full of self-destructive power struggles that eventually lead to loss of humanity and self-alienation.

In light of the model of structure-agency to examine the imperial culture, the two protagonists, Emperor Duanbai and Empress Wu, then become two agents whose

³⁶² Jin Han, *Zhongguo dangdai xiaoshuo yishu yanbian shi* (The Evolution of the art of contemporary Chinese fiction) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2000), 260.

³⁶³ Wang Zheng, "Su Tong fangtan" (Interview with Su Tong) in Wang Zheng and He Ping, *Su Tong yanjiu ziliao* (Research materials for the study of Su Tong), (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2007), 5.

³⁶⁴ Su Tong, Preface to *Hou Gong* (Imperial palace) (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1994), 1.

positions are pre-determined, although they both try to change their fate in the imperial structure. In both stories, history is portrayed as a stifling power machine such that no one can avoid its structuring, even though the story of Empress Wu is supposedly real, yet the one of Duanbai is completely imagined. The difference lies in that, whereas Empress Wu Zetian triumphs over the life-suffocating structure defined by her gender at the cost of self estrangement, the fictive emperor Duanbai fails his assigned role as an emperor. Yet, there is another twist. Empress Wu's success eventually appears to be nothing but a failure, for she has never been free from history, from historical judgment. She is still defined by her gender role, as a woman, a wife, a mother, and a sister, rather than as a capable political ruler. Though the third-person narrative attempts to provide an objective account to celebrate her victories, the first-person narrative from her sons nevertheless portrays her as an inhumane mother. When she utilizes her husband, her friends, her sister, and her children as the stepping stones to the height of power, she is seen to have alienated herself and lost humanity. Therefore, her success as an *extraordinary woman* is accompanied by her failure as a *woman*. As Su Tong claims, "I don't have the desire to invent a Saint Empress Zetian, so this novel as well as this famous woman will unavoidably fall into the historical stereotypes."³⁶⁵ On the other hand, in *My Life as Emperor*, the immature, willful, and ignorant Emperor Duanbai nonetheless gains freedom and salvation after he becomes an ordinary tightrope walker. Political failure leads to individual enlightenment and freedom.

Su Tong once noted that he has always been interested in the unpredictable and uncontrollable turns of individual's fate within history: "I sigh over the turbulence, the ups and downs of life, and have come to feel that the perfect life is nothing more

³⁶⁵ Su Tong, Preface to *Hou Gong*. 1.

than the organic unity of fire and water, of venom and honey.”³⁶⁶ The specificity of history has ceased to be significant, as an individual’s agency against a well established power structure becomes the focus. What is implied in this understanding is that, for Su Tong, history could be a myth designating the imagined imperial order, whereas an individual could be a fictive character freely travelling in and out of that order. In other words, the character could transgress the boundaries between the past and the present, sharing the consciousness with the narrator.

Therefore, in Su Tong’s mythic historical world, history is timeless, amoral, “a kaleidoscopic world” full of color, desire, passion, palace intrigues, suffering, and slaughter. Only stepping out of this world could one gain a clearer perspective and find enlightenment. Su Tong has dreamed of obtaining that calm, aloof, disengaged perspective from a distance, “to transform myself into an old customer at some teahouse on an ancient street in the midst of a kaleidoscopic world with its teeming masses, and soak up the passage of time with my eyes.”³⁶⁷ Yet, he is also aware that it is difficult to have that distance, since everyone lives *in* history and is defined by history. “The distance between the individual and history is both far and near. I see history as some music playing outside my wall or a scary dream on a rainy night; history might see me as an ignorant frog sitting at the bottom of a well.”³⁶⁸ The desire to create a distance and the awareness of the impossibility bring about the ambiguity and ambivalence toward history in Su Tong’s fiction. Instead of playing an enlightened intellectual who is openly critical or simply enthusiastic about history, Su Tong seems to dwell on the history as it is portrayed, conscious of self-limitation for

³⁶⁶ Su Tong, Preface to the English translation of *My Life as Emperor*, trans. Howard Goldblatt, (New York: Hyperion East, 2005), v-vi.

³⁶⁷ Ibid. Preface to the English translation of *My Life as Emperor*, v.

³⁶⁸ Su Tong, Preface to *Hou Gong*, 1.

not being outside it. This ambiguity of being both inside and outside history is most vividly manifested in *My Life as Emperor*.

In this novel, an illegitimate adolescent becomes an emperor due to the empress dowager's secret manipulation; his throne is later overthrown by the legitimate brother and the deposed emperor turns to being a tightrope walker; his favorite concubine Lady Hui is forced out of the palace owing to other women's jealousy and intrigues, yet she later is discovered as a prostitute; his loyal servant, the young eunuch Swallow follows him to be a log-balancing performer and finally dies under the Peng army's knives. The Xie Empire falls, and the former emperor Duanbai, later the tightrope walker, spends the rest of his life in a monastery walking the tightrope during the day and reading Confucius's *Analects* at night.

The story is fictive and dramatic, yet it best reflects Su Tong's purpose to portray life as full of contradictions and dramatic turns against history.³⁶⁹ Stylistically, this novel is developed around phonetic puns, metaphorical images, parallel storylines, and symmetrical structure, all of which are skillfully woven together to construct a degenerate imperial culture determining and consuming an individual's life. It starts from an individual's attempt to break away from the imperial structure and search for a new identity, yet ends at his return to the imperial culture to look for the cure for humanity through Confucius.

Among other tropes, the most obvious phonetic pun is "Wang," which could refer to two distinctive Chinese characters in the novel: "wang"王 (ruler) and "wang"亡 (death). The double meaning of the term "wang" (ruler-death) foreshadows the doomed fate of the imperial culture. Literally, it documents two emperors' unavoidable deaths: the former emperor's passing in the beginning; the last emperor Duanwen's violent end at the conclusion of the novel. Symbolically, it suggests

³⁶⁹ Su Tong, Preface to the English translation *My Life as Emperor*, vi.

Duanbai's death as an emperor when he is deposed, and therefore links the entire imperial culture with inevitable decline and fall.

Most tellingly, the connection between “wang” as ruler and “wang” as death is articulated through the calls of birds. As an embodiment of freedom, the bird announces the death of the emperor and the beginning of a free individual. The image of a birdcall about death first appears to accompany Duanbai's departure from the imperial palace as a dethroned, ordinary man:

I saw a gray bird fly by overhead, its strange cry slicing through the sky.
Wang-Wang-Wang. (207)³⁷⁰

Later the image repeats itself several times, gradually reinforcing the curse on the emperor and the empire. During Duanbai's pennilessly floating around, he accidentally runs into Lady Hui, now a prostitute, and rekindles their passion for several days. Yet, after he realizes how Lady Hui has completely changed, he decides to leave. Then he sees the birds again:

[B]ut in my adolescence and early adulthood, it was these free-flying creatures that captured my fancy....When I felt especially lonely, I struck up a conversation with the birds.

Wang-Wang. I shouted to birds flying overhead.
Wang-Wang-Wang. Their echoing response quickly covered mine.
(242)

The connection to “wang” as death now serves to indicate the death of Lady Hui as an imperial concubine, the end of their romance, the last memory of himself as an emperor, and the beginning of his search for a new identity. In addition to announcing the death of the emperor and his lover, when the bird appears for the third

³⁷⁰ The quotation is from the English translation. In the original Chinese version, “wang” here is the Chinese character 亡 (death). Note that page numbers for all subsequent citations are given in parentheses in the text.

time, it also cries for the people who are blindly ruled by the life-destroying Confucian values. On his way to Pinzhou, Duanbai passes a village struck by devastating plague. However, a young man refuses to leave the village, for he needs to obey his mother and tend his late father's grave in the village.

An indescribable shiver ran through my body as I took one last look at the filial young man before hurrying back onto the road....What could I say to him? In the end, I framed my parting comments in the cries of a bird:
Wang-Wang-Wang. (245)

The bird's cry now turns into foreshadowing of the death of the empire dominated by inhumane virtues and values. These values, for the narrator Duanbai, are more ruinous than the pandemic plague. Echoing Lu Xun's assertion that the Confucian values "eat people," the bird's cry manifests the humanistic awakening of the narrator. He realizes that one individual's enlightenment cannot save the empire from falling. Even without an external attack, the empire could inevitably decay from within. This pessimistic, worrying concern has ever since haunted Duanbai even after he has become a successful tightrope walker cheered by audiences numbering in the thousands:

I knew that I had gained approval as a tightrope walker. It was magical, it was incredibly moving.

Something else echoed faintly in my ear: It came from the throat of a bullfinch that did not know what it meant to be tired; it flew to me from an eave on the roof of the Charming Phoenix, and left in its wake a familiar cry that drowned out human noises:

Wang-Wang-Wang. (267)

This time, the bird presents itself to herald the impending fall of the Xie Empire, which takes place shortly after:

But for some reason, my thoughts froze, and the scene before me was the Great Xie Palace going up in flames, fire and more fire. And the sound filling my ears was the plaintive cry of the bullfinch:

Thus far, the bird accomplishes its mission as a messenger of fate in the second half of the novel. Witnessing the fall of the Xie Empire, the bird verifies the ominous message from the madman Sun Xin. In fact, the repetition of the bird's crying replaces and echoes the repetition of Sun Xin's message in the first half of the novel. Sun Xin, an old, mad imperial attendant, nevertheless turns out to be the only enlightened figure who has foreseen the fall of the Xie Empire.

“Autumn is deepening, and calamity will soon befall the Xie Empire.”
(5)

“The fire is out, and calamity will soon befall the Xie Empire.” (18)

“An assassin's arrow has been shot, and calamity will soon befall the Xie Empire.” (24)

“Now that eunuchs have gained favor, calamity will soon befall the Xie Empire.” (43)

The Emperor is young, and very cruel, he muttered, and calamity will soon befall the Xie Empire....His [Duke Zhaoyang's] mournful comment was the same as the one that had so often come from the mouth of the madman Sun Xin. (77)

His [Sun Xin's] deep red lips were parted, and it almost seemed as if I could hear his raspy voice say to me, Sun Xin is dead, and calamity will soon befall the Xie Empire. (100)

Sun Xin is dead, yet his reiterated, spell-like prognostic message foreshadows the fate of the emperor and the empire, as if the fate has been written and determined in advance, as if he is reincarnated into the bird continuing to cry for the end of the empire, and history.

It is noteworthy that the image of the bird emerges together with the appearance of Lady Hui. Originally a free-spirited, quick-witted, charming girl, Lady Hui captivates the young emperor for her innocent motion of imitating birds flying. The emperor falls in love with the girl as well as the birds. Yet the palace intrigue among women gradually destroys Lady Hui, transforms her into an overly sensitive,

insecure, hateful woman, and finally ends her life as an imperial concubine. On the other hand, the power struggle within and outside the court also turns the young emperor into a cruel, immature, irrational ruler, and eventually leads to the end of his identity as an emperor. The image of bird therefore signifies the two lovers' pursuit of freedom, their desire to escape from the imperial culture, and their future adoption of new identities.

There is a parallel storyline about the young emperor Duanbai and Lady Hui, also repeatedly associated with the image of birds and birdcalls. When Duanbai finally fulfills his dream of becoming a free bird as a tightrope walker, Lady Hui becomes a prostitute as an ordinary woman. The shift of identities, especially the change of Lady Hui's identity, is seen by some critics as a pitiful transformation. For instance, Wu Yiqin takes Lady Hui's turning into a prostitute as the loss of Lady Hui and the last obstacle that Duanbai has to overcome in order to become enlightened.³⁷¹ Yet in the novel, the narrator takes Lady Hui's unfortunate experience as the depravity of the body and the enlightenment of the soul:

I assumed that so many coarse, low-class whoremongers had fundamentally changed this genteel girl from Pinzhou, a once lovely girl who had run beside the Imperial Stream flapping her arms like a bird. Now she truly did seem like a bird, one that had flown off, never to return, leaving behind only a degraded body that was beginning to smell. (241)

My beautiful, unlucky Lady Hui had already been transformed into a free-flying white bird, and from now on we would soar in the same skies, our meetings limited to brief encounters and a wave of the hand; this would legitimize our worshipping of birds and our dreams of becoming one.

We had reached the same goal by different routes. (264-265)

Lady Hui also gains freedom. It seems that being a prostitute is the only way for her to become a free bird. Discarding the Confucian moral code, Lady Hui now

³⁷¹ Wu Yiqin, "Lunluo yu jiushu" (Depravity and salvation), in *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* (Review of contemporary writers), v 6, 1992; in Wang Zheng and He Ping, *Su Tong yanjiu ziliao*, 311.

liberates her body and soul to break away from the imperial structuring. Yet at the same time, her lowly status manifests what Lu Xun called the “iron house” of the imperial culture. Insofar as her social status stays low, she is not completely outside of the Confucian moral hierarchy. In this regard, Lady Hui’s change serves to awaken Duanbai to ponder the entire Confucian culture.

The imagery of the flying bird signifying reincarnation is not only enhanced by the parallel storylines, but also reinforced by the symmetrical structure of the novel. Besides the balance of the ominous messages articulated by Sun Xin and the bird, Duanbai’s two identities also mirror each other. To some extent, being an emperor is also being a tightrope walker. The second identity—the emperor of tightrope walking (走索王)—is simply a literal manifestation of the emperor’s first identity. Both are risky, and the secret for both resides in the art of handling the rope or of ruling. On the other hand, the two identities also negate each other. Being an emperor is being a manipulated chesspiece in the imperial palace; being a tightrope walker nonetheless results from free choice. Being an emperor means that his fate is predetermined by his role in history; being a tightrope walker makes him live again as a free-spirited individual. Duanbai succeeds as a tightrope walker by skillfully balancing on the rope, yet he fails as an emperor in court.

Here exists the most ambiguous and ambivalent message of the novel: it is not clear why Duanbai fails as an emperor: whether because he has never learned to handle the art of imperial rule—Confucius’ *Analects*, or because the imperial culture itself is doomed to destroy humanity and alienate people. In other words, is Duanbai’s failure a manifestation of the importance of Confucianism for the Empire or the criticism of its strangulation of freedom and humanity, or both?

In the last part of the novel, Duanbai packs two things in his backpack: a dog-eared copy of *The Analects* and a coiled tightrope, which he regards as two unrelated

objects that have perfectly summarized his life (286). The symbolic meaning is transparent. While he has never been interested in reading *The Analects* as an emperor, he spends the rest of his life walking the tightrope and reading *The Analects*. Yet, about this bible of imperial rule, Duanbai notes, “Sometimes I feel that this sagely book holds all the wisdom of the world; sometimes I don’t get anything at all out of it.” (290)

Duanbai is contradictory, and the message is ambiguous. On the one hand, it could mean that this sagely book holds the key to the success of the Empire; on the other hand, however, it could mean that the book betrays its sagely reputation and has tricked all the people in the world. The tightrope walker, the free flying bird, does not seem to be fully enlightened after all.

In various places of the novel, there are remarks on history as false narrative: how later historians mistakenly portray Duanbai’s romantic life, how Duanwen is judged as an emperor who lost the empire, etc. It seems that Duanbai attempts to recover the real history with his own narrative, and feels that “we had both been tricked and made fools of by the forces of history.”(279)

There are several levels to approach this comment: one, written history, official or unofficial, is not trustworthy; two, Confucianism maintains an undeterminable status in the imperial culture; three, if Confucianism determines the writing of history and therefore the writing of him, Duanbai is not sure whether he still lives in history or is out of it.

From an emperor whose fate is historically determined, to a free individual, to the individual facing history, the novel compresses a mythic, allegorical account of imperial culture. Moreover, the ambivalent attitude toward history manifests Su Tong’s agnosticism toward history: “what is real, and what is unreal?”³⁷² Without

³⁷² Su Tong, Preface to *Hou Gong*, 1.

obvious moral judgment, Su Tong manages to make his novel an organic whole of contradictions and ambiguities. Just as the name of the empire *Xie* (變) “harmony” ironically signifies the disharmony that fills the novel.

However, as agnostic, sarcastic, and ambiguous as it is, the novel nonetheless is partial toward a sense of death, doom, and the end of the imperial culture, manifested in the ominous messages, the non-productive palace intrigues, the cold blooded killing, and natural catastrophe resulting from human behavior. History serves as a backdrop for an individual’s spiritual journey. Yet, rather than finding the lofty, the sublime, the enlightened, he finds himself involved in the writing of history, and also being written by history. History is an overwhelming existence. There is no escape.

In contrast to other contemporary historical novels that celebrate the collective consciousness centered on the imperial discourse, *My Life as Emperor* rearticulates the freedom of the individual against the imperial structuring. Echoing from afar Lu Xun’s observation that “the feudal society eats people” (吃人), Su Tong nonetheless delivers a more ambiguous account to characterize the relationship between individual, empire, and history.

Wang Anyi’s Fact and Fiction: family history reconstructed

If Su Tong’s individualistic journey to the past brings about an “iron-house” history which is decadent, suffocating, and unproductive, Wang Anyi and Gao Jianqun’s family histories seem to accentuate the revolutionary, productive aspects of history borrowed from minority groups.

In Wang Anyi’s autobiographical novel *Fact and Fiction*, the narrator, a female writer based in Shanghai, explicitly suggests that this novel is a result of her root-searching effort in creating a matrilineal family history. The entire novel is

structured around the questions: “who am I?” and “where did I come from?” As Huangzhi Wang appropriately pointed out, *Fact and Fiction* directly responds to the contemporary identity crisis, and serves as an attempt to reconstruct the self and the national identity.³⁷³

As a child of Communist “comrades” (同志) who take power after Shanghai’s liberation, the narrator grows up in an awkward situation in which she finds herself at a loss over her own identity. On the one hand, she belongs to the authoritative revolutionaries who speak official Mandarin and look down upon the local Shanghainese as “urban petty bourgeois (小市民)”; on the other hand, she is one of the outsiders often considered as bumpkins (乡巴佬) by modern Shanghainese. She is attracted to the colorful, mysterious, and capitalistic Shanghai past and desires to fit in; yet her mother, as an orphan who has grown up in Shanghai and later abandoned Shanghai to become a revolutionary, deliberately conceals her own Shanghai identity and discourages the child’s interest in the old Shanghai. To the child, Shanghai’s past is more appealing; to her mother, Shanghai does not have a past. As an authority figure, the mother embodies the revolutionary discourse that consciously renounces the old world and is enthusiastically determined to transform the world anew. In the revolutionary discourse during Mao’s era, Shanghai, as well as the other parts of the country, has been cut off from tradition and become an “orphan” city without history. As Huazhi Wang observed, “Shaped by class consciousness in modern times, Communism did not only reject urban bourgeois modernity, but also attempted to cut off historical connections to Chinese tradition with an ardent ideal of constructing a brand new world. It produced an ‘orphan culture,’ within which ‘history’ is designed to be an ideological apparatus to prescribe identities for offspring

³⁷³ Huazhi Wang, *Problematizing the Nation: The “Wang Shuo Phenomenon” and Contemporary Chinese Culture* (Ph. D Dissertation, Cornell University, 1999).

of the voluntary orphans.”³⁷⁴ The ideological denial and the material existence of Shanghai’s past create a double image for Shanghai, which reinforces the child’s feeling of displacement and being an outsider to Shanghai. To make it worse, the father is from a remote place where it is impossible to have a family reunion. As a result, the entire family becomes orphans of Shanghai. When other people enjoy family reunions during the Spring Festival, the only place they can visit is another comrade’s home.

Loneliness characterizes the narrator’s life. She has no extended family to associate with, no family history to hold onto, and she finds it difficult to form any meaningful relationship with people in her own life. Shanghai, as a modern cosmopolitan city, signifies both a concrete and symbolic place where people can only have transient, superficial relationships. This is proved true in both capitalist and socialist modernities. During the first half of the 20th century, capitalist modernity in Shanghai has transformed the kinship-based relationship into a class-based, monetary relationship. This is manifested in the mother’s encounter with her wealthy aunt when the mother is little, which partly explains the mother’s resolutely abandoning Shanghai to become an eternal orphan. After the revolutionary comrades take over Shanghai, the relationships between the comrades and the local Shanghainese are still in tension. Rather than forging an equal, socialist, universal “comrade-like” relationship among people, the comrades take pride in their position as saviors that transcends the Shanghai local identity, whereas the Shanghai people take pride in their old local identity. Comrades are still outsiders, Shanghai is still Shanghai, and the relationship between them remains superficial and arbitrary. In Shanghai, the narrator observes, “becoming strangers seems to be the only result of our encounters with other people.

³⁷⁴ Huazhi Wang, *Problematizing the Nation: The “Wangshuo Phenomenon” and Contemporary Chinese Culture*, 299.

[The relationship] between the unknown pedestrians jostling each other in a crowd on the street signifies the eternal relationship between us.”³⁷⁵ To conquer loneliness, the narrator starts her root-searching project to define her own position in history, temporally and spatially, which she believes would give her a sense of determinacy and convey a fateful relationship. “I have always been trying to find and construct a fateful relationship, to locate my position in the crowd and clarify my situation, so as to avoid losing myself and falling into confusion.” (203)

The root-searching project is structured around temporal-spatial coordinates, with the vertical axis representing the historical timeline, the family lineage, and the horizontal axis signifying her personal relationship with the social environment. In her words, she attempts to answer two questions: “how did she come to this world?” and “what kind of relationship does she have with the surrounding world?” (5)

Following the mental mapping of the two axes, the narrator launches her journey in two distinct directions, leaping back and forth between two coordinates. The novel consists of ten chapters. Five chapters document the narrator’s personal experience, whereas the other five chapters present the family history the narrator creates. Personal experience and family history alternate with each other, forming a parallel narrative roughly following a chronological order. Starting respectively from the origin of the mother’s family and the narrator’s childhood, the two storylines eventually intersect at the narrator’s current position, where the mature writer consciously and self-reflexively conducts a root-searching project. In other words, the narrator is both the starting point and the ending point of the narrative. She remains a powerful existence as a character, a narrator, and an analyst. The search for self identity is so powerful that she is the omniscient presence even in the exploration of the ancient family myth.

³⁷⁵ Wang Anyi, *Jishi yu xugou* (Fact and Fiction) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1993), 203.

Needless to say, the parallel narrative creates suspense, which constantly directs the reader to navigate between ancient history and contemporary events, creating enormous temporal gaps. However, the narrator remains a first-person narrator, easily bridging the temporal gap by continuing to use phrases like “my ancestors,” “my great grandfather,” and so forth. Such narrative strategies keep the reader alert to the narrator’s conscious choice of temporal-spatial configuration, and at the same time make the novel a coherent whole. The effect resembles the parallel action in the cinematic narrative. It forms a continuum of consecutive narrative segments, each representing a temporal progression. It involves the reader in a constant awareness that in the end the temporal and the spatial will intersect, yet the intersection is continually delayed. The recurring juxtapositions of the past and present thus at once sharpen the contrast and bridge the gap between the past and the present during the process of reiteration.

Indeed, the portrayal of the narrator’s personal experience differs dramatically from the construction of her family history. The personal experience is trivial, ordinary, manifested in children’s play, neighbor’s small talk, gossip, and everyday quotidian relationships. For the narrator, her personal experience as a child living in Shanghai and later an educated youth sent down to the countryside seems to be organized around a series of arbitrary events which she has no control over. These arbitrary events, including the Cultural Revolution, the “up to the mountain and down to the countryside movement,” were commonly perceived as the heroic, grand historical projects conducted during the narrator’s adolescence and young adulthood. However, against the distinctive historical background, her story unfolds quietly, unremarkably, and self-reflexively in the trivial, everyday life. The revolutionary discourse that used to mobilize several generations and boil the young people’s blood at that time is submerged and subverted in the people’s socializing activities. With no

epic stories, no revolutionary sublime, no serious trauma, no regret, only a sigh is left, and endless loneliness. She does not feel enthusiastic about the revolution, nor does she feel sorry about her life. She just quietly accepts what history has thrown to her and attempts to find “profound” relationships with people. History to her is a series of contingent events that bring people together, and the meaning of history is produced through people’s intimate relationship with each other rather than from official ideology or discourse. For instance, she observes that the students’ parades during the Cultural Revolution resembled today’s “parties.” They liked parading because they could gain freedom from school, present themselves on the street, and develop premature romantic relationships. For the narrator, parades provide a temporary community, one that has little to do with the nominal meaning of the event—revolution, but that creates an atmosphere of collectivity and sociality. Yet such collectivity is transient and artificial, unable to form a fateful relationship. “Just like the modern ‘party,’ the parade in effect creates an illusion that people are mingled together and getting along well. It is a smoke ball.”(128) A seemingly grand historical event is thus reduced to the children’s performative socializing activity and the narrator’s musing on personal relations.

Similarly, the experience of being a *zhiqing* (educated youth) in an Anhui village must have played an important role in the narrator’s life. Yet she treats the experience just as another contingent event, enriching her life when growing up. With no apparent scar, no unforgivable regret, she deems this period of personal history an important stage of life toward maturation, which lends her an opportunity to reflect on “fateful relationships.” History is represented in such a way that the insignificant things such as her partying with other *zhiqing*, staying with the resentful Director Zhang’s family, having dinner with mother’s comrade—her “Uncle”, and her negotiation with the *gongshe* (the Commune) to get a room, and so forth, become the

fateful events of her life. Otherwise put, for the narrator, it is not the big historical event—the Cultural Revolution—that has determined her fate, but her relationship with the local people that has altered her life. Through her experience in the village, she realizes what a fateful relationship is: “Survival binds us together. For survival we must depend on others, and be depended on. This kind of codependent-otherwise-both-fall relationship is a fateful relationship. Yet this codependence tires us out. Since we know that it is very important, we feel it is even more unbearable. We yearn for freedom and lightheartedness one day when we can get rid of this relationship like taking off our clothes.” (226) “Yet after I come back to Shanghai, walking on the crowded street where freedom is everywhere and everyone is independent, I nevertheless feel confused. I find that freedom is tied together with loneliness. They are together.” (227)

Her desire to find a fateful relationship yet maintain individual freedom ends in a paradox. A fateful relationship can cure one’s loneliness, yet its heaviness constrains freedom; on the other hand, absolute freedom is always accompanied with loneliness. The important historical event, the Cultural Revolution, thus becomes a site for the narrator to do intellectual, philosophical speculation. Her emotional detachment offsets the heaviness of history imposed on her, making the otherwise unbearable memory into material for thinking, not about history, but about human relations. “To some extent, the Cultural Revolution resembles a big game (大游戏) or a big gossip (大闲话) among adults,” the narrator writes, “it gave us an opportunity to experience all kinds of human relations and broaden our life experience....When it ended, the world went back to its normal track. We feel it was like a dream.” (227)

This assertion opens two avenues for understanding. First, a significant historical event is relativized as such lighthearted socializing activities as “game” or “gossip,” rather than the more commonly accepted notions as drama, comedy, tragedy,

or farce. It not only counteracts the grand revolutionary discourse during the Cultural Revolution, but also dissolves the heavy traumatic sentiment prevalent after the Cultural Revolution. The narrator's personal experience, therefore, lays bare a peculiar account against the sublime, the dramatic, and the traumatic portrayals of the Cultural Revolution, and forms a singular temporality against official and mainstream histories.

Such an individualistic perspective to formulate the everyday as the basis of experiencing history, needless to say, deconstructs the grand narrative of history in every sense. History has been hollowed out, de-centered, manifesting multiple temporalities instead of just one single historical time. Harry Harootunian once discussed the disjuncture between the empty, homogeneous, modern time and the individual, lived, observed, human time. He argues that Japan's modernity is characterized by the contemporaneity of multiple temporalities and the coexistence of the lived individual time and a totalizing national time.³⁷⁶ In this light, Wang Anyi's *Fact and Fiction* gives a particular version of Cultural Revolution that reminds one of the "doubleness" of history—official, mainstream history and lived, individual history.

Second, the narrator claims that she discovers the fateful relationship during the Cultural Revolution when people have to rely on each other for survival, yet she later counterbalances this statement by stressing that the Cultural Revolution is an irrational, abnormal event and thus the relationship developed during that time is temporary, therefore not profound or fateful enough. "The Cultural Revolution in our lives seems to lack a logical connection," she says, "it appeared abrupt. It neither came inheriting our previous connections, nor did it leave us some connections to pass on. Of all the relationships we developed during this time almost all disappeared afterwards. We just attended a game of destroying the old procession and forming a

³⁷⁶ Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2000).

new one. Now that the game is over, we have returned to our old position and old track, never to meet again.” (227)

The narrator’s frustrated desire to find a fateful relationship to conquer loneliness in reality is intertwined with the desire to find her origin to position the self in history. However, contrary to the trifling, almost loquacious portrayal of personal experience, the family history is full of grandiose glory and heroic adventure. Enthusiastically and stubbornly, she makes sure that her family history is one that combines legendary heroes, mystical beauties, breathtaking landscapes, bloody battles, and fateful events. As mentioned above, the parallel narrative between the “trivial” in the present and the “grand” in history not only intensifies the “triviality” and the “grandness” simultaneously, but also subverts the myth of history writing. On the one hand, the lived history opens up a temporal gap with the official or mainstream histories (as in the “scar literature” of the late 1970s) and thus undermines the official history; on the other hand, by creating a history of her family, the narrator demonstrates how history could be constructed in a self-serving way. In other words, both the official history and her own history—experienced or imagined—could be myths. This self-deconstructive approach renders fact and fiction indistinguishable in both her personal and family histories and as such, reveals the paradox of her both wanting to deconstruct the contemporary history and desiring to create a grand ancient history. In other words, for the narrator, the allegedly heroic, or for some chaotic, revolutionary age only inscribes itself as insignificant and nonsensical, which has left nothing but a feeling of loneliness, unfulfillment, and displacement. The revolutionary ideal only appears empty, and what people experienced has always been the ordinary everydayness—growing up, making friends, falling in love, starting a career, and still feeling lonely. She does not show enthusiasm for participating in the grand historical moment, and does not show the post-revolutionary disillusionment, either. What else

is more powerful to deconstruct a notorious historical event than basically saying that nothing eventful has happened? In the meantime, however, for her, a grand narrative of history is much needed to define one's identity, and if it is not in the present, then it should be in the past.

There are several possibilities to approach this paradox. First, the narrator may intend, consciously or unconsciously, to demonstrate that no matter what a "revolutionary" time period it is, people still live their ordinary daily lives, and the grand narrative or sublime discourse only proves to be a big lie, a delusion. Second, contradictorily, there is this eternal unfulfilled desire for meaning and determinacy, so much so that the illusion of ideology is a necessity rather than an option. The attempt to unmask official discourse and deconstruct official history is thereby undercut. This paradox resembles the narrator's uncompromising pursuit for the fateful, interdependent relationship and simultaneous personal freedom, exemplified in her romantic encounters with several men. Third, to play the gender or minority card, maybe it suggests that as a woman in the patriarchal society, her history has largely been ignored, for she lacks the authorial voice to write history; given the right to be a participant or an architect of history, she could write her own version of history. But again, paradoxically, her construction of the family history does not fundamentally differ from a patriarchal family myth. She chooses the mother, instead of the father, as the starting point to forge her family lineage. Yet from the mother on, back to medieval times, her family tree is still following a patrilineal track. Huazhi Wang observantly suggests that maybe it is precisely the writer's gender consciousness, to show that in a patriarchal society, it is impossible to create a matrilineal history since all the links have been missing.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁷ Huazhi Wang, *Problematizing the Nation*, 367.

Perhaps, as a self-reflexive melting pot, the novel contains all of the above. But one thing is for sure, that is, her fictional family history is hero-centered, sweeping through time and space, very much like an epitome of Chinese history condensed in a family. In this sense, the past seems to serve as the wish-fulfillment of the present, and the search for self identity is extended to the search for national identity. The question then becomes: in what position is the contemporary time period in history? Or, how could we position contemporary China in history? If an “orphan” is lost in the modern city Shanghai without a family history, a nation is also lost without referring to its past.

The narrator’s root-searching adventure starts from her mother’s family name: “Ru,” which is such a rare name in China that the narrator believes that all “Ru” people are connected in terms of kinship. According to the historical materials she has referred to, people with the surname “Ru” are descendents of a nomadic people, the Rouran in the Northern Wei period. Yet her mother’s hometown, Shaoxing in Zhejiang province, is in the South. How did the uncultured, nomadic people living in the northern steppe end up being mingled with the rice-growing southern folks? Her hunting for the missing links therefore is characterized by the “travel” back and forth from the nomadic, minority culture in the north to the agricultural, Han-centered culture in the south. In a broader sense, it is the quintessence of Chinese civilization, featuring ethnic interactions and the combination of martial and civil achievements.

It is a process of “choosing one’s ancestors.” For the reason that the historical materials are so fragmentary, the narrator has to make arbitrary choices to select the materials. She confesses that during her research historical heroes always reside in the center of her choice, for “only heroes have the active strength and energy [to create history], ordinary people can only follow the trend.” (137) For instance, among several possibilities, she chooses to believe that after the Rouran kingdom fell and disappeared from history, the rest of the Rouran people were subdued by another nomadic people,

the Tujue, and later conquered by Mongols. The rationale behind this choice is that she needs Genghis Khan to be her ancestor:

Sometimes I feel my creation of history has the tendency of the subject matter dictating the research. Long before I found any materials, I had already decided to find a hero to be my ancestor. I always want to associate myself with a strong bloodline, consciously or unconsciously. This feeling originates from a wish, that is, I wish that the life that has been passed on to me has been a necessity instead of a contingency of chance. I wanted this life to have swept away all obstacles and for nothing to have prevented it from being passed on. I wanted it to have thrived wherever it went, blossomed whenever it was seeded and born fruit whenever it blossomed. I wanted it to have marched on with songs and joys, and, with the confidence of decisive triumph, to have been passed on from generation to generation, eventually to me. It is only a hero who can realize this wish. (139)

I must have a great hero as my ancestor. I don't believe there has been no hero at all in my several-thousand-year history. Even if there isn't, I want to create one by myself. I want him so distinctively brave and successful that all people are willing to follow him. His glory will shine all through the tunnel of time and illuminate our ordinary lives. (137)

"Our ordinary lives" motivates the wish to find a great hero as her ancestor. The other reason she picks up Genghis Khan is because: "The Mongols were brave and adept in battle. They united the steppe and dominated the world for a time. The great name of Genghis Khan was known in all central Asia." (137) Note here that in Chinese history, Genghis Khan was unquestionably celebrated as a great Chinese hero. The Yuan Dynasty established by his grandson was considered part of the unified Chinese Empire which had the largest territory in Chinese history. Therefore, the selecting of Genghis Khan is evoked by a sense of nationalistic sentiment and an Orientalist consciousness in today's world. The narrator nostalgically imagines the glory of Genghis Khan's triumph and self-mockingly confesses:

The glorious name of "invader" has tempted my vanity. In modern times, which I know about well, there have been all sorts of records of how other people have bullied us. Such traces were left everywhere in the streets of

the city where I live. It was out of the question for us to even think about bullying others. The world after I was born was already settled into a stable picture of assignment, and territories have been defined by international treaties. “Invading” is again out of question. We missed the glorious times of seeking hegemony and our life is very dull and ordinary. I can only project my fantasy to root-searching. (172)

This is an “Ah-Q” style self ridicule. Rather than advocating imperialist invasion, it suggests an imaginary “vengeance” against the foreign (Japanese as well as Western) powers who have exercised their hegemonic power over China,³⁷⁸ overcompensating for the uneasy feeling of national inferiority in today’s world order. As a result, Genghis Khan is not only a family hero for the narrator, but first and foremost a national hero, who embodies the great qualities that the narrator aspires to in order to define self- and national identity.

If a hero symbolizes the lost unity for a community, a family or a nation, where everybody could identify with the hero to define one’s identity, the narrator nevertheless does not always stick to heroes to construct her family history. Instead, she intentionally moves her attention to the “losers”—the “untouchables” (墮民). This was a group of Mongol nobles who were downgraded as lowly people and transported to the south without any official records of them. This is how the narrator links her nomadic origin with the southern hometown. For the narrator, the “untouchables” are in effect also heroes because, during a dark age of unfair treatment, they survived and passed on a strong bloodline. They not only survived, they triumphed. They were not tamed, but civilized. One of them, Ru Fen, even passed the imperial civil examination and became a Zhuangyuan (the highest ranked candidate in the exam, top candidate for the civil service). Even though there are several possibilities to create a lineage, she insists on having all the ups and downs, triumphs

³⁷⁸ Huazhi Wang also made this point. See Huazhi Wang, *Problematizing the Nation*, 318.

and failures, in her family. For instance, when she discovers that Ru Fen might not belong to her immediate family, she ponders:

It is not a big problem to go back looking for new materials and imagine something different. But it is a big problem to experience a new psychological and emotional identification. My imagination has come through such a turbulent, long way and established such a cherished bloodline. I love Mugulü. I love Cheluhui. I love Genghis Khan. From my whole heart I sympathize with and love the “untouchables.” I have also had feelings for Ru Fen. My musing has traveled through a dark, long tunnel of time. Mountains and rivers have experienced many ups and downs, and changed their lords many times. This several-thousand-year history has been flowing through my heart....I don’t want give up any of them. I want every possibility. I cannot give up the Rouran. I cannot give up the Mongol Empire. I cannot give up the Naiyan. I cannot give up the Zhuangyuan, either. The Zhuangyuan embellishes our family history. He makes us close to the central authority. My ancestors have always been warriors with long blades battling on galloping horses; the Zhuangyuan adds a sense of grace and poetry to our family history. (359-60)

This combination of ups and downs, martial and civil, characterizes the narrator’s family history. Isn’t it the allegory of Chinese history? For the narrator, what she inherits from her ancestors is not just the blood, but also the vitality and vivacity (生命力). Even though her own grandfather was bankrupt and eventually abandoned his family, she considers him as a lost child with abundant energy. “A bankrupt family must be an energetic family,” she writes, “destructive force and constructive force are two similarly strong forces, both originating from the billowy current of life.” (51) Destructive and constructive forces have both been made explicit in the narrator’s family history, and the real subject of her root-searching project turns out to be “life.” “I think, this is the reason why I like the latter type of literature [family history fiction],” the narrator claims when self-consciously pondering upon family history fiction. “It makes such concepts as ‘life,’ ‘kinship’ more tangible and approachable. How wonderful it is to experience that!” (408)

However, for the narrator, “life force” or “spirit” has always been tied up with “traveling” or “floating.” In addition to her ancestors’ journey from the steppe to the southern land, her imagination also “travels” wildly through time and space. She likes to use metaphors such as “river” as life, and “tunnel” as time, manifesting her consciousness of the fluid relationship between past, present, and future. While she is determined to define her position in life and history, she finds it unstable and undeterminable, for life is forever flowing forward, just as the whole of humanity is floating on the ocean, and destiny is just an unknown realm. “Earthquakes make our continent a drifting island.” When she describes her experience of an earthquake in Shanghai, she discovers that “according to this observation [that our continent is a drifting island], there is no shore or destination any more. Everything is floating.” (314) Ironically, such absolute insecurity and disorientation nevertheless lead to another discovery: this is the moment when she finds the fateful, “profound” relationship with her husband while the shadow of death unexpectedly befalls them. It seems to suggest that, when our common destiny is death, to love is the only “profound” relationship between us.

In another novella by Wang Anyi, *The Heartbreaking Pacific*, the narrator makes a similar observation: “In the end I want to repeat what I have said before: ‘if we look at maps, continents appear to be floating islands as well.’ All land on earth is rocks in the sea, on which humanity resides. Humanity is actually a drifting species, and drifting is our eternal destiny.”³⁷⁹

Perhaps, it is both the consciousness of, and the fear of, the eternal “floating” and “drifting” that motivate her to search her historical origin. To search the origin is to return, return to the past, and also return to home. “On the surface, family history

³⁷⁹ Wang Anyi, *Shangxin Taipingyang* (The Heartbreaking Pacific), in *Xianggang de qing yu ai* (Sentiment and love in Hong Kong) (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 1996), 383.

fiction has a sense of returning home,” the narrator explains, “it seems that after it [family history fiction] is tired of traveling, it eventually goes home.” (408) Where is the home for the narrator? It is the intersection of the past and the present, after discovering the fate and the force of “life,” with the life force determining one’s fate. Yet this “life” is still traveling, floating, with its forces, still passing on, to the future.

Herein resides the novel’s last paradox: being aware of destiny as an unknown yet desiring to define a recognizable home to return to. This home, as discussed above, points to the unknown future that inherits the “life force” from the past. This life force, which has manifested itself as characteristics of bravery, creativity, resilience, and persistence that have been passed on from her ancestors to the narrator, determines her ancestors’ fate, as well as hers. The contingent historical events, such as the Cultural Revolution, could not alter the narrator’s fundamental fate as a writer, since she believes that she inherits the talent from her ancestor, the Zhuangyuan Ru Fen. Without the Cultural Revolution, she might have experienced something else to become a mature writer, since she also inherits an unrelenting spirit from her nomadic ancestors. It is the life force that designates a sense of determinacy and fatefulness, rather than any discursive historical events. This life force, should we say, resembles the “national spirit” or “national characteristic,” which combines the characteristics of the nomadic hero and the characteristics of the Chinese intellectual. It is the life force that has created the glory of the Chinese civilization. It transcends the specificity of the narrator’s time and space, and during a period that lacks a sense of direction, provides reassurance of the continuity of Chinese civilization.

In this light, it is noteworthy to ponder the significance of minorities in this novel. Minority here embodies double meanings: both as the ethnic minority in the narrator’s blood and as a woman who creates history. For the narrator, nomadic people have contributed their productive, diligent, and competitive spirit and energy to

Chinese civilization, just as women and men have constructed history together. It is through the interdependence, cross-fertilization between minority and majority, and the fateful, profound relationship between men and women that history has been made. Rather than regarding the ethnic minority people as culturally inferior to the Han majority, or taking women as marginal beings without authorial voice, the novel pronounces the fateful significance of minority in the construction of self- and national identities.

Gao Jianqun's The Last Xiongnu Hun: foundational myth of Chinese culture

If Wang Anyi's *Fact and Fiction* suggests the interdependent, mutually-reinforcing relationship between the Han Chinese and the ethnic minority in constructing the Chinese history, Gao Jianqun's *The Last Xiongnu Hun* (Zuihou yige Xiongnu 最后一个匈奴) makes it even more explicit that it the synthesis of the nomadic and the sedentary spirits that has characterized the regional Shanbei culture and even the Chinese civilization as a whole.

Published in 1993, the same time when *Fact and Fiction* was published, *The Last Xiongnu Hun* follows the trend of family history fiction. It tells a story interweaving love and hate among several families for three generations. Like Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* (红高粱) or Cheng Zhongshi's *Bai Lu Yuan* (白鹿原), *The Last Xiongnu Hun* centers its narrative on the interaction of several families during the modern revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras. To some extent, this novel could be put into the vaguely defined category of the "new historical fiction" for its emphasis on local history during the modern revolutionary period. Yet, rather than constructing "an oppositional discourse that challenges both the outdated discourse of revolution

and the now dominant discourse of ‘Chinese modernity,’”³⁸⁰ this novel enthusiastically celebrates the triumph of the Communist Revolution and its determinant relationship with the region under question—the Shanbei Plateau. The subject of the novel, therefore, is not “revolution,” but rather, the region, or more accurately, the regional characteristics. As the narrator unequivocally claims, the real subject of the novel is the “the phenomenon of the grand culture of Shaanbei” (the north of Shaanxi province) (陕北大文化现象).³⁸¹

The novel vividly portrays several interrelated characters with complicated relationships: student-turned-Communist revolutionary Yang Zuoxin; bandit-like local warrior Hei Datou; Hei Datou’s widowed wife and Yang Zuoxin’s lover Hei Baishi; Yang Zuoxin’s son—writer Yang Anxiang; Hei Datou and Hei Baishi’s son—Communist Party official Hei Shoushan; and Dan Hua, who is the granddaughter of Miss Zhao, Yang Zuoxin’s former fiancée, and who turns out to be Hei Shoushan’s illicit daughter, and so on and so forth. Kinship, romance, local custom, and political belief are intertwined, rendering the relationships among people complex and unpredictable against the revolutionary background.

Nevertheless, in addition to merely dramatizing the relationship among people, the writer consciously ties the characters to their regional, historical backgrounds, suggesting that there is a determinative relation between people and their origin. As the narrator explicitly explains, the primary characters of the novel “belong to four clans with distinctive background: the Yang clan, descended from an illicit relationship between a Xiongnu Hun and a Han girl in Wuerbao; the Hei clan, who are the descendents of the Hui ethnic minority that have immigrated to the Shaanbei

³⁸⁰ Lin Qingxin, *Brushing History Against the Grain* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 3.

³⁸¹ Gao Jianqun, Postscript to *Zuihou yige xiongnu* (The Last Xiongnu Hun) (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 1993), 580.

plateau from Ningxia and Sichuan; the centuries-old Bai Clan, who have been living here since the ancient, legendary Xuanyuan period; and the Zhao Clan, who came to Fushi city by crossing the Huanghe River from a point beneath a Chinese scholartree in Shaanxi, yet later left Fushi city hurriedly.” (293)

Diversity characterizes this region, the Shaanbei Plateau, and the ethnic complexity distinguishes this area from other places in China. For the narrator, one’s origin—ethnic and cultural alike—seems to mold one’s character, and there is a fateful reason why the Shaanbei Plateau became the center of the modern Chinese Revolution. It is this region that embodies the characteristics that nourish revolution, one that nevertheless appears as the cultural margin of the Chinese civilization. “The ambitious author wanted to write a chronicle for the 20th century, so he chose the Shaanbei Plateau, the desolate village, the listless small town, the dusty spiral road, and the splendid Fushi city, as the stage on which his characters could perform. He chose the phenomenon of the grand Shaanbei culture, which is deeply ingrained in every granule of the yellow earth and still prevalent in the modern time-flow like a ‘living fossil,’ to provide the poetic atmosphere and the aesthetic background of the characters’ activity.” (293)

The nature of this “stage” or “background,” of course, cannot be reduced to a “granule of the yellow earth” or the “living fossil” such as the folk songs or the paper-cuts that the narrator fervently describes, but is carried in the characters—their inherited family traits distinguish the culture of this locality.

Specifically, the narrator makes the story revolve around the Yang family living in Wuerbao village, and at various places, deduces the family characteristic as the combination of the nomadic and sedentary spirits. This combination, manifested in several characters in the Yang family, comes from a foundational myth that traces their origin and accounts for their behavior. The novel opens with a colorfully

portrayed ancient legend that took place in Wuerbao village: By the end of the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220AD) when the Xiongnu Hun were finally driven out of the Han Empire and withdrew to central Asia, a young Xiongnu soldier fell in love with a Han girl as he retreated to the Wuerbao village. Love made him stay with the girl yet he had to face the punishment from the local clan. The girl determined to die with him even though she was pregnant. In the end it is the girl's pregnancy that rescued both of them as the local clan would not kill an unborn baby. The couple survived and thus became the foundational parents of the Wuerbao village.

From the beginning, the myth already sets the tone that the people living in Wuerbao inherit similar qualities from their ancestors: brave, rebellious, freedom-loving, perseverant, and not necessarily obedient to the rules of authority. They are the descendents of, and therefore bear the traits of, both the Xiongnu Hun and the Han. These traits not only manifest themselves in physical features, as in their distinctive physique and distinctive toenails, but also in their character and behavior. Some of them are forever nomads, longing for roaming and freedom; some of them are sedentary residents, insisting on living a peaceful life. "Half of the soul in this family belongs to the roamers on the horseback, the other half of the soul belongs to the peasants who are intensely attached to the yellow earth until death." The narrator writes, "[t]he roaming soul forever pursues places faraway, whereas the agricultural culture nurtures the perseverant protector of home. The magical combination of the two constructs the clan in Wuerbao. Two types of soul govern this clan alternately, and it is hard to achieve balance between them. Sometimes one type dominates and sometimes the other type dominates. Therefore there are realists and romanticists, and timid peasants and restless rebels." (467)

Thus far, we know that "Xiongnu Hun" in the title signifies something that has detached from the ethnic background, something that is abstract, intangible, and

transcendent, that is, the nomadic, rebellious spirit that was not celebrated, or even approved, by the official Confucian discourse in history. The narrator makes it explicit that the Shaanbei Plateau had been on the margin of the Confucian culture, not completely assimilated or “civilized” by Confucianism, which had dominated the agrarian culture in the imperial China. Here is a place “that was ignored by the Sage’s doctrines.” Yet ironically, here is also a place that has nourished the revolutionary spirit that rescued the dying Chinese civilization from falling.

In several places, the narrator enthusiastically celebrates the marginal status of the Shaanbei plateau and its constructive function in Chinese history. This vulgar place, the late Qing official Wang Peifen used to state, is one that lacks traces of civilization, one that is excluded from the Confucian world. In his mockingly written report to the Guangxu Emperor, *Qi bi gou* (Culturally bankrupt: seven accounts), Wang condescendingly described the Shaanbei Plateau as a place where no beautiful landscape, no habitable architecture, no decent clothing, no refined food, no knowledge and scholarship, no graceful woman, and no rituals and morality are to be found. (491) In a word, this is a place where the orthodox Confucianism has had limited impact. However, for the narrator, it is just this place, marginal to Confucian culture, that is the origin of the Chinese civilization and has nourished the centrifugal, revolutionary forces to continue Chinese civilization. It is this place that has produced the peasant rebels such as Li Zicheng, Gao Yingxiang, and Zhang Xianzhong, and it is determined that it later became the cradle of the modern Chinese Communist revolution. From the origin of civilization to the margin of Confucian culture, then to the revolutionary center, the narrator believes that the Shaanbei Plateau has constantly energized and rejuvenated the static Chinese culture. In his words:

The Shaanbei Plateau is, of course, the origin of the Xuanyuanshi. The tomb of the Huangdi Emperor [the legendary first emperor in Chinese

civilization] on the south of the plateau is the evidence....But because of the chronic wars among different ethnic groups, because for a long time, this land had been ruled by nomadic peoples, also because of the ethnic interactions and inter-marriages among different ethnicities, the Confucian doctrine could only symbolically stay here for a while like water, only moistening the surface of the ground. The great contribution of Confucianism lies in that, during the long, two-thousand-year grand feudal unification, it produced the centripetal and cohesive forces that saved our old oriental empire, preventing it from falling apart like the other three old empires in the world, which have disappeared from the long current of history; yet its [Confucianism] failing resides in that it constrained the energetic national spirit, limiting the creativity of this people known for their intelligence and diligence....Therefore, the desolate Shaanbei Plateau, ...the Sage-forsaken wasteland...announced to the world, here, there was another fantastic group among the descendents of Emperors Yan and Huang. These born rebels, these uncivilized people, this untamed group, provided cardiac resuscitation for the dying national spirit. (275)

The narrator then goes to suggest that, like Heaven's intention, Mao Zedong chose Shaanbei as the cradle of modern Chinese revolution. The rebellious Mao entered Shaanbei, "like a dragon returning to his old ocean" or "a tiger submerging in the forest," receiving great nurture from this land and maturing quickly as a national leader. American journalist Edgar Snow used to say that, the narrator recalls, it is probably a coincidence that the origin of the Chinese civilization became the bedrock of Mao's revolution for him and his fellow men to save the nation and reform the national spirit. (275)

Regardless of the narrator's grand analysis of Confucianism and Chinese civilization, his observation of the Shaanbei Plateau and its relationship with modern Chinese history nevertheless poses several questions about Chinese history in general: First, he deconstructs the homogeneous Confucian culture in the imperial period. Rather than a commonly believed agrarian, Confucian society, imperial China is more heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity and cultural activity. Second, he constructs continuity between the imperial history and modern Chinese history. By linking the modern revolutionaries with the peasant rebels in the past, the narrator suggests that

the modern revolutionaries in effect inherited the rebellious spirit from their ancestors. Moreover, by turning the Confucian margin into the revolutionary center, the narrator creates a centrifugal spiral between the past Chinese empire and the modern nation state. Just as modern China has marginalized, or even tried to extinguish Confucianism, from the imperial historical perspective, the past Chinese Empire might have marginalized the modern nation state. In other words, modern China continues the imperial history by completing another centrifugal and then centripetal cycle. Third, again, after being transformed from the Confucian margin to the revolutionary center, the “grand culture of the Shaanbei Plateau” has transcended the boundary of Shaanbei, and in effect embodies the Chinese national characteristic.

In sum, like the minority heroes in Wang Anyi’s *Fact and Fiction*, the “Xiongnu Hun” in this novel serves as the constitutive, productive, and creative force in Chinese history. Traveling between the marginal and the central, between the unofficial and the official, between the unorthodox and the mainstream, *The Last Xiongnu Hun* provides a peculiar account in the discussion of Chinese characteristics from a marginal perspective.

Zhang Chengzhi’s Spiritual History: from contradiction to incorporation

If Wang Anyi and Gao Jianqun’s minority historical fiction incorporates the nomadic spirit in Chinese national characteristics primarily from a mainstream Han writer’s perspective, Zhang Chengzhi’s *Spiritual History* nonetheless manifests a paradoxical position of the narrator/writer as both a marginal Jahriyya and an elitist intellectual residing in the cultural center. In the contemporary literary landscape, Zhang Chengzhi presents an unusual case in finding one’s self identity. As a Beijing-based ethnic Hui Chinese, Zhang first viewed himself as the adopted son of the indigenous Mongolian people in his early writing, then reclaimed his original Hui

ethnic minority origin and Muslim identity in the novel *Spiritual History* in the early 1990s.

In fact, the search for self-identity goes hand in hand with the search for a mature national subject. Rather than a born member of a minority imagining oneself to be the subaltern, Zhang situates himself at the cultural center trying to find a national cure from a position in a minority world. No one is more radical than Zhang Chengzhi in identifying with the minority subaltern to criticize the cultural mainstream. As Yibing Huang points out, as a former Red Guard, in fact the creator of the name “Red Guard” (hongweibing, 红卫兵), Zhang Chengzhi has always followed his revolutionary idealism and attempted to find the maturation and redemption of his generation in the representation of the subaltern people.³⁸² Zhang Chengzhi’s reinvention of himself may seem sudden to some critics, but for Huang, Zhang’s identity shift manifests his continuous pursuit for the romantic sublime rooted in the revolutionary tradition and his endeavor to find an alternative form to renew Chinese culture, which in Zhang’s eyes, has been contaminated by materialism, nihilism, cynicism, and spiritual void. Claiming to be “the son of the People,” he has transformed himself from a former Red Guard into a cultural hero or heretic. This transformation, however, is not an abrupt break from the past, but rather, carries on the revolutionary legacy from the Maoist period. In Huang’s words:

While for the others, this overcoming of alienation between the individual and the people [to become the socialist new man] has been, from the beginning, a doomed socialist fantasy, for Zhang Chengzhi, it remains a viable path and a historical mission for the individual subject to take on. In other words, what Zhang Chengzhi self-consciously pursues is not modernist irony or post-modernist cynicism, but the romantic sublime in the guise of a “primitive, tragic beauty.” Facing contradictions, dilemmas, and paradoxes, he

³⁸² Yibing Huang, “Zhang Chengzhi: Striving for Alternative National Forms, or, Old Red Guard and New Cultural Heretic,” in Yibing Huang, *Contemporary Chinese Literature: From the Cultural Revolution to the Future* (Macmillan: Palgrave, 2007).

chooses not deconstruction but sublimation; and only through such trial can his own subjectivity finally be tempered.³⁸³

In this light, his conversion to a Jahriyya seems more understandable. For Zhang, Jahriyya “not only stands for an obscure Sufi Islamic sect in China but also mirrors a new alternative for the self-generation or self-renewal of Chinese culture.” Huang continues:

Consequently, through writing *Heart History*, Zhang Chengzhi discovered the possibility of a work that creates its own form, “modes history, religion, and literature into one and withstands challenges from these three sides at the same time.” That is to say, content and form merge into one—heart (*xinling*) or spirit (*jingshen*)—which also serves as “the protagonist of this work of my life.” And Zhang Chengzhi’s goal was no longer to be an ordinary individual writer among his peers, but “to be a pen of the Jahriyya, to write a book that they will use their lives to protect!”³⁸⁴

Huang’s analysis is insightful, that it does not matter whether Zhang claimed to be the adopted son of the Mongolian people or the pen of the Jahriyya Muslim group, he has always been searching for the romantic, the idealistic, the sublime, and the redemptive that would combat the currents of political cynicism, nihilism, defeatism, and the frenzy of economic capitalism. And all his pursuit has reached a culmination and been clearly articulated in *Spiritual History*.

As much as Huang provides insights on Zhang Chengzhi’s search for individual identity and an alternative national form through the representation of the subaltern people (rather than the ethnic minority people), he probably still needs to stress the significance of the minority in Zhang’s works. Indeed, the subject of Zhang’s literary adventure has always been the ethnic minority groups: the Indigenous Mongolian, the Hui, and later the Xinjiang Uigurs. In 1999, he published a new book,

³⁸³ Ibid. 113.

³⁸⁴ Ibid. 124.

Lands and Feelings, which consists of photos and excerpts from many of his previous works about the three Chinese northern minority regions—the Mongolian grassland, the Hui Minority’s Yellow Earth Plateau, and the civilization of Xinjiang. The goal is to “illustrate the support, friendship, and nurturance” he has received “from the people of these three lands. The writer is only the son and the plot thread that connects them, while the people themselves are the real subject and protagonist.”³⁸⁵ Even though Zhang indistinctly put all three minority groups into one category “the People” and once again articulated his own position as the “son” of them, it is hard to dismiss the fact that he has always rooted his literature in the minority Other. The relationship between the cultural mainstream and the cultural margin is manifested in the relationship between the Han center and the minority periphery. For Zhang, the geographic, linguistic, and religious specificity of the minority cultures appears to be a contrasting color on the cultural canvas, on which the mainstream cultural landscape appears dull and degenerate. Rather than the politically-, economically-, and culturally-underprivileged groups, minority serves to unmask the spiritual scarcity of the Han and complements what the Han lacks. In this regard, the marginal position Zhang Chengzhi takes nonetheless reflects a self-critical Han-centered perspective and manifests the at once centripetal and centrifugal tendencies of becoming-minority. These tendencies, contradictory as they seem, are mostly laid bare in *Spiritual History*.

Spiritual History was published in 1990, at a time when the market economy started encroaching on the intellectual, scholarly space. Zhang made the Jahriyya, a Sufi Islamic Sect in northwestern China, the subject of his book and continued his spiritual journey through the discovery of a religious group. The book documents the

³⁸⁵ Zhang Chengzhi, *Dalu yu qinggan* (Lands and Feelings) (Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 1998). Preface. Also cited and translated by Yibing Huang.

silence and sacrifice of the Jahriyya during their more than two hundred years' struggle to preserve their history and belief. From the beginning, Zhang has already set up a series of binary oppositions between the Han cultural center and the Jahriyya: material abundance vs. material scarcity; official written history vs. orally transmitted history; hypocrisy vs. faith; spiritual void vs. religious purity and so forth. And it is precisely against these binary oppositions that the portrayal of the Jahriyya seems significant. What Zhang seeks is not poverty and ignorance, nor religion in the narrow sense, but faith and humanism that he believes the Han Chinese lacks:

No, you should not think that what I have described is just religion. What I have been describing has always been the ideals that you have been pursuing. Yes, ideals, hopes, and pursuits—all these that have been abandoned by the world yet loved by us. I will also formally describe the humanism that I have finally found; after reading the book you will find that this kind of humanism is much more authentic than the one sold cheaply by those from the Chinese intellectual class.³⁸⁶

Nevertheless, “ideals, hopes, and pursuits” are attached to the specific geography, its material scarcity only evokes in Zhang the feelings of awe and the sublime:

You don't need to go deeper inside. As long as you don't turn around and continue staring at it, the reddish brown cracked earth and bare mountains will burn your eyes. In the cruel straight sun light, your eyes will dry, crease, congest, and an unspeakable drought will penetrate into your heart and lungs, making you feel forever thirsty.³⁸⁷

Here is a real remote and backward place. The landscape is severe and miserable, and the people's character is rigid and bold. Except for Sufism (mysticism), there is no force that fits here.

The natural conditions and the social customs are unthinkable—I can only use prose or poetry to express my provoked imagination; I cannot comprehend it. The incapacity of the intellectuals [to understand it] is the reason why this kind of religious yellow plateau has not yet been understood.

³⁸⁶ Zhang Chengzhi, *Spiritual History*, preface.

³⁸⁷ Ibid. Chapter 1.

It is incomprehensible, you can only worship it—the region of drought can only survive the summer with melted snow preserved in the vault during the winter; yet the villages spread for three *li*, mules and cattle are plenty, and the big villages containing thousands of people adjoin each other, what do they drink? —the region of illiteracy lacks informed people; because of a far-sightedness as well as parochialism, the Hui people here don't encourage children to learn Chinese script, but they are all versed in the history of the past two hundred years. Do you know the history during Emperor Qianlong's reign, Jiaqing's reign, Tongzhi's reign, or the 28th year of the Republic?³⁸⁸

Incomprehensibility induces awe and the feeling of the sublime, which creates a sense of violent aesthetics. The land is not inhabitable. It is their religion that helps the Jahriyya to survive the severe environment. Yet on the other hand, to preserve their religious belief, they refuse to leave the non-inhabitable land and to be assimilated. For the outsider, it is a circle of misery. To live is to suffer, and in the history of the Jahriyya that Zhang documents, to live is to be killed. Religious wars between different sects and political suppression from the imperial court only reinforce the internal determination for preservation of their identity and sacrifice. Zhang finds in this unspeakable violence sublime spirituality. It is beyond morality, beyond rational choice, and debunks the hypocrisy of all other beliefs—religious or Confucian. It is pure spirituality. For Zhang, this awe-inspiring spirituality has been detached from its material condition, or more precisely, transcendent of the material condition. It is the universal value that the materialistic, pragmatic Han Chinese lacks.

Moreover, instead of keeping it within the Jahriyya, Zhang believes that this spirituality has transcended linguistic and ethnic boundaries, and should be embraced by all Chinese. Contrary to the Jahriyya's determined refusal to be assimilated by the Han culture, Zhang chose to write the Jahriyya history with Chinese language. On the surface, he attempted to find the alternative language to substitute for the lost "mother tongue," the use of the Chinese language nonetheless incorporates the Jahriyya culture

³⁸⁸ Ibid. Chapter 2.

into the Chinese cultural landscape and expands Chinese vocabulary and linguistic scope. In Zhang's own words:

Losing a mother tongue—Chinese and the other minority groups which have been assimilated would never understand the pain of losing a mother tongue. I am a writer. I changed the form of my novel time and again, until it became poetry, then this *Spiritual History*—I only have one desire: to make my Chinese escape from the limit of the square Chinese characters!³⁸⁹

Yet Chinese is still Chinese. The desire to create a language that goes beyond Chinese only proves to expand the Chinese language in terms of its vocabulary. The identification with the marginal Jahriyya is therefore ultimately offset by his positionality in the Han center. In other words, he positions himself in the Han cultural center yet identifies with the Jahriyya. Moreover, Zhang made it clear that even though the book was written for the Jahriyya people, the target readers were the majority Han Chinese.³⁹⁰ As the literary critic Zhou Zexiong sarcastically pointed out, some ethnic Hui people are actually unable to read the book they will “protect with their lives!”³⁹¹ Despite the original opposition Zhang sets up between the Jahriyya and the Han, between the spiritual and the material, despite the tracing of the Hui history from Middle East to China where they lost their homeland and mother tongue, Zhang in the end turns the contradiction into incorporation, and takes the Jahriyya as part of China:

I want to tell friends, especially those youths in Shagou and Banqiao: Jahriyya is our own and China's treasure. When the cyclical historical *shi*-trend turns to the point where reunion is the trend again, be sure to remember, after losing homeland and mother tongue, don't lose Jahriyya.³⁹²

³⁸⁹ Zhang Chengzhi, *Spiritual History*, Part seven.

³⁹⁰ Zhang Chengzhi, Preface to *Spiritual History*.

³⁹¹ Zhou Zexiong, “Zhang Chengzhi de jiexian” (The limits of Zhang Chengzhi), *Shuwu* (Study room), 1999, vol. 5. Zhou's quotation is from Zhang Chengzhi's preface to the novel *Spiritual History*. See shuku.net:

<http://www.shuku.net:8082/novels/chengzhi/chengzhi04.html>

³⁹² Zhang Chengzhi, *Spiritual History*. Part seven.

Here, “reunion” refers to the unification of different religious groups worldwide. However, here also lies Zhang’s deepest ambiguity. The desire to preserve Jahriyya is accompanied by the desire to fuse Jahriyya into China, to have Jahriyya recognized and adopted by the mainstream Chinese. Rather than advocating division and parochialism, Zhang borrows the notion of the *shi*-trend and takes religious unification as the normal and foreseeable historical trend. Ironically, Zhang never bothers to ask how to achieve the cultural and religious unity yet preserve the uniqueness of Jahriyya as a religion. Implicitly, Jahriyya here has been detached from its religious essence, but becomes a transcendent cultural value in contrast to materialism and nihilism. In this regard, Jahriyya is not fundamentally different from the Mongolians on the grassland. It functions as the marginal, critical, yet supplemental material of the Chinese civilization. Shifting the focus from the material to the spiritual, from the religious to the cultural, and from the marginal to the central, Zhang Chengzhi not only incorporates Jahriyya into China, but also re-centers himself as a cultural hero.

Jiang Rong’s Wolf Totem: the balance of lupine-sheeplike character

In many ways, Jiang Rong shares similar life experience with Zhang Chengzhi: both born in Beijing; both sent down to Inner Mongolia as educated youths during the Cultural Revolution; both finished advanced education later; both identify with minority people and write about minority culture; and both appear to be cultural elites trying to discover the key to redeeming Chinese literature or history. Even the forms of their works look similar: neither *Wolf Totem* nor *Spiritual History* is a typical novel in the literary sense; rather, they both appear hybrid, incorporating historical documents and lengthy lectures into fictional writing. The difference is that Jiang

Rong did not make his literary appearance until much later, with the unprecedented success of *Wolf Totem*.

Like *Spiritual History*, *Wolf Totem* attracted broad attention for various reasons, which stirred up a heated discussion on different aspects of the book. Some regard the book as a rare achievement of superb quality. For example, social celebrities from different fields articulated their admiration for the book from different perspectives: basketball star Yao Ming confessed that he was inspired by the collective and courageous spirit of the wolf.³⁹³ Business tycoon, CEO of Haier Group Zhang Ruimin said that the business world could benefit from the wolves' military talent.³⁹⁴ Mongolian singer Tengger saw the spiritual connection between his music and the wolf's howl to Heaven.³⁹⁵ Most significantly, literary critics promoted the book for its insightful reflection on Chinese national characteristics. They saw it as a self-reflexive dissection of the defect of Chinese Confucian culture in comparison with nomadic culture. Characterizing them as an agricultural, sheep-like culture and a nomadic lupine culture, supporters of the book considered *Wolf Totem* an epic cultural discovery that brings to life the suppressed wolf totem essential for the blossoming of Chinese civilization.³⁹⁶

For the same reasons, however, the success of the book and the articulation of the lupine spirit also pushed the warning buttons of the other critics. They saw it as a

³⁹³ Yao Ming: "We want to be a pack of wolves, and I will be the head. All the wolves need to move together— in formation, charging, and defending. The most impressive thing about reading *Wolf Totem* is the wolves' collective and courageous spirit." In an interview with Yao Ming. See Long Xingjian. *Langtuteng pipan* (The critique of *Wolf Totem*) (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 2007) 13.

³⁹⁴ Zhang Ruimin's comment on the book. See the back cover of *Lang tuteng* (Wolf Totem) (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2004).

³⁹⁵ Tengger. Ibid.

³⁹⁶ An Boshun, "Xiangyong lang tutent de jingshen shengyan" (Enjoy a spiritual feast of *Wolf Totem*), preface of the Chinese version *Lang tuteng* (Wolf Totem), 2.

reactive book, that it promotes the law of the jungle, “confuses Chinese history, contradicts ethnic relations, and is anti-humanity.”³⁹⁷

Indeed, from its inception, the book has been treated as more than a literary piece. Critics questioned the book both from literary aspects (whether it is a novel), historical (whether the nomadic people worshipped the wolf), and socio-cultural aspects (whether it is appropriate to promote a lupine spirit),³⁹⁸ all of which ironically served to boost its unparalleled success. Between its publication in April 2004 and August 2005, its sales surpassed one million copies. Penguin Publishing House bought the copyright for the English version,³⁹⁹ and Hollywood director, Peter Jackson, director of the *Lord of the Rings* series, also participated in the “wolf” family and bought the movie rights to *Wolf Totem*. Haiyan Lee vividly portrayed how controversy has constituted its success:

Since hitting the bookstores in China in 2004, *Wolf Totem* has been a most unlikely bestseller and a phenomenon to be reckoned with. From the start, it has been riddled with paradoxes: it was written by a political science professor who had to remain anonymous because of his run-ins with authority in 1989; it went on to win ten domestic literary prizes with the endorsements of party officials, scholars, and business tycoons alike; the audio version was serialized on Radio Beijing; its sales figure is dwarfed only by that of Mao’s Little Red Book in the history of modern publishing in China; the author (Lu Jiamin) has come out of hiding after winning the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize, but is not allowed to travel abroad to promote his book.

The novel also has the distinction of attracting unprecedented international attention *after* and largely *because* it had become a mass cultural sensation within China, thereby breaking the pattern of writers and their works achieving fame overseas only to be ignored or spurned by mainland readers and critics—thanks usually to censorship, but not always. It is perhaps one of very few bestselling Chinese novels that has genuinely stirred up some

³⁹⁷ Long Xingjian, *Lang tuteng pipan* (The critique of *Wolf Totem*) (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 2007), 6.

³⁹⁸ See Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Long Xingjian, *Lang tuteng pipan*, 2.

controversy among international critics and managed to split critical opinion (almost always strongly-worded) pretty much down the middle.⁴⁰⁰

Needless to say, the outside, contextual controversies come from the inside, textual paradox—given that any single piece of work invites multiple readings. The novel tellingly portrays the life experience of Chen Zhen, an educated youth from Beijing sent down to the Inner Mongolian grassland during the Cultural Revolution. During his stay, he discovers that the wolf enjoys a godlike status on the grassland—the Mongol people take the wolf as the messenger of Tenggri (Heaven) to keep the balance of zoology on the grassland. Moreover, there is an intriguing relationship between the people and the wolf—they hate the wolf, kill the wolf, yet also admire the wolf, and worship the wolf. Fascinated by all these, Chen Zhen decides to raise a wolf cub to study the wolf's behavior. Later he indeed steals a pack of newborn wolf cubs and saves one to nurture with dog milk. He takes good care of the cub and keeps a keen eye on him to observe him growing up. However, the little wolf cub refuses to be domesticated. He gradually discovers his own wild nature and more and more resolutely attempts to escape the leash even at the risk of his own life. To avoid being hurt by the growing cub, Chen Zhen cuts the cub's fangs, which eventually leads to serious inflammation, only to be worsened by the cub's constant attempts to flee. In the end Chen Zhen has to kill the cub as the cub's illness has become incurable. In Chen Zhen's understanding, wolf nature cannot be tamed, and to kill him as a warrior is to save his dignity as a wolf. The heartbreaking experience of raising the wolf cub enlightens Chen Zhen on two accounts. One is wolf's decisive importance to the grassland and the "heavenly principle" underlying this relationship. With the project of socialist modernization encroaching, Chen Zhen painfully witnesses the

⁴⁰⁰ Haiyan Lee, "The Lord of the Wolves?" in the online source: *The China Beat: blogging how the East is Read*, June 19, 2008. Electronic access: <http://thechinabeat.blogspot.com/2008/06/lord-of-wolves.html>

disappearance of the wolf, the gradual loss of the grassland, and nature's punishment to human beings. The other is the "wolf nature" that he learns from the cub, which he believes is the key to understanding Chinese civilization as well as world history.

There is, first of all, a certain level of nostalgia, not only about the educated youth's lost life experience, but also about the fading of the natural landscape, that evokes reader's reminiscence. Just like the early modernist literature that mourns the disappearance of the "pastoral beauty" in nature during the process of industrialization, *Wolf Totem* reminds one of the retrogress of civilization when ignorant human behavior continually destroys the grassland against "heavenly principle," of which Beijing has become a direct victim, suffering severe dust storms and air pollution. In other words, the articulation of the "heavenly principle" is convincing enough to win some environmentally-conscious people's hearts to reflect on the project of modernization, which, accidentally, is in accord with the government slogan of "strategy of sustaining development."

On another level, however, by linking the "heavenly principle" with the "wolf totem," the novel shifts its focus from critiquing modernity in general to critiquing Chinese civilization and national characteristics, which understandably stirs up deep water. In addition to the seemingly objective, detailed portrayal of the exotic life in the grassland, the life struggle between man and nature, between man and wolf, between human principle and heavenly principle, the book offers a provocative grand thesis on Chinese civilization: that the wolf totem is the precedent of the dragon totem, that Chinese civilization originates from nomadic culture, that the lupine spirit in the nomadic culture offers constant, much-needed energy to the static, passive, Han agrarian culture and reincarnates Chinese civilization in a cyclical manner. In a word, the nomadic culture is not only not the lower stage of the agricultural culture that represents material, technological inferiority, as the imperial history or Marxist

historical materialism interprets it, but is separated from its material basis and abstracted in a transcendent, spiritual level. It is the lupine spirit in the nomadic culture that constantly transfuses self-driven, competitive energy to the agrarian culture, thereby keeping the Chinese civilization from declining for centuries.

Similar to Gao Jianqun's observation in *The Last Xiongnu Hun*, the argument in *Wolf Totem* is nevertheless more articulate, beyond the regional boundary, and bolder in its theoretical speculation. It is no surprise that such a grand argument engenders both applause and questioning. As the critic Lei Da comments:

As a literary work, *Wolf Totem* assembles plenty of creative elements, therefore it is among the precious grand narratives with epic characteristics; as the advocate of a certain cultural outlook, however, it claims having found the key to understanding the world civilization only via grasping the "lupine character" (狼性性格), and thus attempts to romantically, emotionally, and touchingly reinterpret and rewrite the entire history of humanity, of civilization, and of China. Even though the author has a laudable motive, is thoughtful and full of wisdom, the book still cannot avoid many defects.⁴⁰¹

By confirming the literary achievement of the book, Lei Da praises *Wolf Totem* for its creative portrayal of grassland life, yet meanwhile criticizes its attempt to rewrite history. Indeed, the major controversy that is both the book's blessing and curse reside in the thought-provoking discussion of the "lupine character" (langxing 狼性) and its essential function in history. "Lupine character," subverting the normally accepted connotations associated with the wolf as cruel, selfish, double-faced, and crafty, is now defined by the characteristics that are very positive: brave, motivated, determined, collective-minded, disciplined, strategic, and free-spirited. It

⁴⁰¹ Lei Da, "Chongdu *Lang tuteng* de the ruogan sikao" (Some thoughts on rereading *Wolf Totem*) originally in *Guangming ribao* (Guangming Daily); retrieved from www.XINHUANET.com, August 15, 2005, "*Lang tuteng* zheshe Zhongguo dangdai wenxue que linghun" (*Wolf Totem* reflects that contemporary Chinese literature lacks soul). Electronic access: http://news.xinhuanet.com/book/2005-08/15/content_3354950.htm. ; also quoted in Long Xingjian, *Lang tuteng pipan*, 15.

has been detached from the animal wolf, but abstracted into a cultural symbol—wolf totem. The narrator suggests that the wolf totem is the “elder brother” of the dragon totem. Insofar as Chinese civilization originated from the northeast where the nomads lived, Chinese people, majority Han and otherwise, are all descendents of the nomadic people from the steppe. It is the agricultural mode of production that gradually transformed the “lupine character” into “sheeplike character,” which represents the weakness of the Chinese “national characteristic.” Yet to define the Chinese “national characteristic” solely as sheeplike is biased, for the lupine character has always existed in the Chinese blood, which only needs to be accentuated once in a while via nomadic transfusion. In history, whenever Chinese civilization entered an inert, stagnant stage, the nomadic people would come to transfuse their energy to help rejuvenate the civilization. The cyclical dynastic shifts were all owing to the nomadic transfusions to perpetuate the Chinese Empire. On the other hand, the “lupine character,” sometimes characterized as “the grand nomadic spirit,” is also associated with the modern Western powers (including Japan). Therefore, it not only determines the fate of a civilization, but also shapes the modern world order. For instance, in the novel, right after the protagonist Chen Zhen starts raising the wolf cub, he has a conversation with his friend Yang Ke, when both of them are observing the newborn cub fighting with puppies for dog milk:

Chen, mesmerized by the sight, was deep in thought. “We’ll have to study him closely,” he said finally. “There’s a lot we can learn from this. Our dog pen is a microcosm of world history. I’m reminded of something Lu Xun once wrote. He said that Westerners are brutish, while we Chinese are domesticated.”

Chen pointed to the cub. “There is your brute.” Then pointed to the pups. “And there’s your domestication. For the most part, Westerners are descendants of barbarian, nomadic tribes such as the Teutons and the Anglo-Saxons. They burst out of the primal forest like wild animals after a couple of thousand years of Greek and Roman civilization, and sacked ancient Rome. They eat steak, cheese and butter with knives and forks, which is how they’ve

retained more primitive wildness than the traditional farming races. Over the past hundred years, domesticated China has been bullied by the brutish West. It's not surprising that for thousands of years the Chinese colossus has been spectacularly pummeled by tiny nomadic peoples." (173)⁴⁰²

Chen Zhen then goes on suggesting that the other three of the world's oldest civilizations (Ancient Egypt, Ancient India, and Ancient Babylon) all died out because they were agrarian empires lacking "lupine spirit;" whereas China survived because of the "contributions of the nomadic peoples of the grassland." (174)

There are, no doubt, both nationalistic sentiment against Western imperialism in the modern world and nationalistic pride in the continuous Chinese civilization. By attributing both the modern shame and the pre-modern glory to the "lupine spirit," Chen Zhen establishes his argument on a morally neutral ground while maintaining the Chinese national boundary. In the meantime, rather than simply characterize Chinese culture as a sheeplike culture against the Western lupine culture, as some critics mistakenly understand, Chen Zhen incorporates the "nomadic spirit" into "Chinese characteristics," suggesting that Chinese civilization comprises both agrarian and nomadic cultures. Whenever the lupine character and the sheeplike character were in balance, or the lupine character slightly overtook the sheeplike character, the Chinese Empire was prosperous; whenever the lupine character was completely suppressed by Confucian doctrines, the Chinese character was reduced to the sheeplike one and the Empire was in decline.

Implicitly, this argument continues Lu Xun's discussion of national characteristics in the early twentieth century, and echoes as well the controversial documentary film *He Shang (River Elegy)* by Su Xiaokang made in the 1980s. Assuming binary opposition of China and the West, of the sheeplike Chinese characteristic based in agrarian culture and the lupine Western characteristic based in

⁴⁰² Jiang Rong, *Wolf Totem*, trans. Howard Goldblatt, (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 173.

nomadic and maritime cultures, this argument carries on the intellectual legacy that has been inexhaustibly searching for reasons for China's modern lag since the last century. The difference, however, resides in the cure. Instead of looking for the national cure from outside, *Wolf Totem* suggests that the fundamental remedy has always been deeply rooted within China yet has been suppressed by feudal despotism, which is the Chinese nomadic spirit (Zhongguo youmu jingshen, 中国游牧精神).

The shift of attention from the West to minorities to search for inspiration to improve national character signifies the shift of national imagination. On the one hand, *Wolf Totem* incorporates a minority group into China, not only as the subaltern or the supplement, but as the origin and the savior of the Chinese civilization; not only as the source of material diversity, but as the source of spiritual inspiration. It celebrates the minority position, and deconstructs the domination or totalization of the mainstream Han culture. On the other hand, however, it is both critical and constitutive of the totality of the Chinese culture, which is not defined by Confucianism, but determined by the connection between wolf and dragon, by the common worship of Heaven, and by the balance between lupine and sheeplike characters.

It is not hard to see Jiang Rong's struggle on the relationship between mode of production and relation of production, between the material and the spiritual, and between the spatial and the temporal. He seems to believe that the "nomadic spirit" is determined by the geographically-specific nomadic mode of production. Once the mode of production changes, the relation of production also changes and the "nomadic spirit" withers. Yet on the other hand, he also believes that the "nomadic spirit" can be detached from the specific material condition—the grassland, and be preserved and perpetuated in a transcendent level. In this sense, the spatial narrative, the discussion of minority culture, is extended to a national, historical level, and meant to serve the temporal analysis of Chinese history and civilization.

Lu Xun's legacy: dialectical return to the imperial history

This chapter has examined minority historical fiction, which more or less reflects on, rather than faithfully represents, Chinese imperial history. Despite their diversity, the narratives all revolve around the following questions in one way or another: Confucianism-dominated imperial culture, minority contribution, and Chinese characteristics. Implicitly or explicitly, they have carried on Lu Xun's legacy to investigate the influence of Confucianism on Chinese society and dissect Chinese characteristics as derived from the agrarian culture. Yet, rather than being overtly iconoclastic toward the imperial culture and ashamed of Chinese characteristics from an self-Orientalistic view, minority historical fiction manifests a more dialectical, self-reflexive, and deconstructive nature. On one level, these works don't simply deny or abandon imperial culture as a whole. For instance, Su Tong's *My Life as Emperor* presents a more ambivalent, agnostic attitude toward Confucianism. Wang Anyi celebrates both the martial and civil achievements of the Chinese Empire in *Fact and Fiction*. On another level, nevertheless, they deconstruct the homogeneous portrayal of the civility-oriented Confucian culture. They reinterpret the imperial past by incorporating the minority culture into the Chinese culture, and re-define the Chinese characteristics as the blend of the nomadic, spiritual, and the sedentary, pragmatic qualities. For example, the narrator in *Fact and Fiction* and the protagonists in *The Last Xiongnu Hun* inherit both the nomadic and the Han blood; the Jahriyya presents the minority Chinese who embody pure spirituality; and the Mongolian grassland nourishes the "Chinese nomadic spirit" crucial for Chinese civilization.

Indeed, these works at once echo and negate iconoclasm toward history prevalent during the May Fourth period, and more self-reflexively and dialectically re-examine the imperial culture. They are not simply against iconoclasm or

wholeheartedly embrace imperial culture. Rather, it is a dialectical return, a repetition with difference. Contrary to what Gilles Deleuze has discussed in the critiquing of theater by subtraction and amputation, e.g. Carmelo Bene subtracts some elements from Shakespeare's play to make a critical statement about Shakespeare and the power of theater,⁴⁰³ minority historical fiction adds and elevates minority to the totality of the imperial culture. It starts from the consciousness of the "lack" in the cultural center, and finds a cure from the margin to compensate for the "lack" by addition. If contemporary "empire fever" in the mass culture manifests the dialectical return to the Chinese Empire by re-articulating the universalistic discourse "Tianxia," minority historical fiction implies the same dialectical return by becoming-minority.

In this light, to borrow the metaphor of the automaton chess game again, minority historical fiction creates alternative histories that reflect the countermoves of the Chinese Empire directed by the imperial-time regime in contemporary ethnic-national-global encounters. As a result, becoming-minority signifies the consciousness of becoming-empire, the empire that returns with continuous variations, the empire that is still becoming.

⁴⁰³ Gilles Deleuze, "One Less Manifesto," in *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime*, ed. Timothy Murray, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 239.

EPILOGUE

In recent years, besides the popular representations of the past empires and emperors, there also emerged academic or semi-academic works participating in the “empire fever.” Not to mention that the word “*di guo*”(empire) flooded into the market across media, bearing a positive rather than negative connotation, some Chinese scholars also engaged in the serious or quasi-serious writings on Chinese empire. Among them, Wang Hui’s *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi* (The emergence of modern Chinese thoughts), Zhao Tingyang’s *Tianxia tixi* (The System of all under Heaven), and Han Yuhai’s *Tianxia—jiangshan zoubi* (All under Heaven—discursive writings on rivers and mountains) deserve attention.⁴⁰⁴ Investing their scholarly insights in the discussion of Chinese intellectual history, or in general, imperial history, in connection with the contemporary domestic and global atmosphere, these authors started reflecting on China’s present position in the world. They all suggest that on the foundation of the rich yet complex imperial history, modern China cannot be constrained within the boundary of a nation state defined by its national borders, or a sovereign country defined by the global market and international law. This phenomenon, I believe, is the product of the “imperial-time regime.” The re-articulation of *Tianxia*, the re-imagination of the Chinese empire, all point to the *shi*-trend that encompasses modern China to revisit modern and imperial histories, and to redefine China in the contemporary world.

⁴⁰⁴ Wang Hui., *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiangde xingqi* (The emergence of modern Chinese thoughts) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2004); Han Yuhai, *Tianxia-jiangshan zoubi* (All under Heaven—discursive writings on rivers and mountains) (Beijing: Zhongguo haiguan chubanshe, 2006); Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia tixi—shijie zhidu zhexue daolun* (The system of all under Heaven—the guide for the world philosophy of regimes) (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005).

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